30X30

MARCH 2026

SPOTLIGHT

DR. TRACIE L. KEESEE

When we first started exploring how best to improve the representation and experiences of women in policing in earnest at the USDOJ in 2018, Dr. Tracie Keesee was one of the first calls we made. She has been with us from the beginning, from that first national summit through our steering committee and launch in 2021. It is not an overstatement to say we could not have done this without her. Yet the first thing Dr. Tracie Keesee said when we asked to sit for this interview was: why?

Publication Date: March 2026

"When we think about the next generation of leaders who are already in the mix, moving forward, realigning old systems," she said, "I think it's more important to have conversations with those people than with some old retiree."

She also disagrees with our characterization of her as “change agent,” saying “the work that I do is not new. There are people inside organizations who've been fighting the good fight long before I showed up on the scene. And I think, for me, I'm just contributing to what everybody else had already started.”

What Dr. Keesee lifts up instead is that her presence as a Black woman both in uniform and in rooms where decisions are being made is in and of itself a form of action. "I would say my presence, without me even opening my mouth, signals change," she said. "And so, with that comes a lot of responsibility. Not just to sustain and keep moving, but to call it when you see it."

A 25-year veteran of the Denver Police Department, co-founder of the Center for Policing Equity, appointed expert to the United Nations Human Rights Council, and Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, Dr. Keesee is one of the most respected voices in law enforcement of our time.Importantly, she has used her platform to consistently and unapologetically tell the truth: the truth about what policing is, what it isn't, and what she believes it could be.

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>
> – Dr. Tracie Keesee,
> **Associate Professor of Public Safety & Justice, University of VIrginia | Founder, Respect The Om**

"WHY ARE YOU YELLING?"

Dr. Keesee did not grow up dreaming of wearing the badge and originally planned to go to New York and pursue a career as a designer. When that plan didn't materialize for various reasons, she was 25 years old, a single parent, and looking through the back pages of the Rocky Mountain News for employment opportunities. A half-page ad for the Denver Police Department caught her eye.

I was just thinking, I need a job, right? I need a paycheck and insurance and all that stuff." One of the most iconic voices in modern American policing joined the department so she could get healthcare for her and her family. Her mother, a child of the South, was not enthusiastic. "She said to me, I don't want you to get hurt, and I don't want somebody to kill you."

Keesee joined the Denver Police Department's class of 1989. She arrived at the academy, which at the time was a few trailers in a city park. From the jump, she didn't hesitate to push back on the status quo when it didn't make sense. "At one point I looked at the training officer and was just like 'Why are you yelling?'" Similarly, when recruits were assigned to collect litter in the park, Dr. Keesee had questions."'Can you explain to me why am I picking up trash?'"

"I wasn't trying to argue," she said, laughing. "But that just didn't make any sense." Decades later, she's still asking the same kinds of questions, just in bigger rooms about higher stakes things.

Just Breathe: Forward-Thinking Leadership for First Responders

Hosted by Dr. Tracie L. Keesee, this podcast focuses on a simple idea: regulated leaders make better decisions.

Grounded in real-world experience, it treats breath and nervous system regulation as practical leadership tools to strengthen clarity, judgment, and performance under pressure.

Coming soon: Just Breathe: How Managing the Breath Helps Public Safety Professionals Make Mindful, Value-Driven Decisions at Work and at Home.

Publication Date: March 2026

"AND PERHAPS AN AFRO WIG WILL HELP YOU."

From her first day, it was clear the status quo in American policing had not been designed with someone like Dr. Keesee in mind.

"When I arrived, there was no such thing as women's uniforms," she said. "Which means I had to be retrofitted into a man's uniform. There's no space for hips. There's buttons on the wrong side." Dr. Keesee recalled that the bulletproof vest was worse, built for a man's frame, pressing in all the wrong places. "It wouldn't be until almost, my God, like eight to ten years later when they actually began to design vests for women."

Then there were the hair policies. For Black women, the regulations weren't just extremely challenging to comply with, they were a statement about whose presence was considered legitimate. "I tell people, we are the only group of people whose hair has a law," Keesee said, referencing the CROWN Act.[1] She recalled that people were gradually acknowledging that women belonged in the profession, "but you wanted us somehow to show up as white women, and that's just not how it works."

Another area of exclusion involved specialty assignments like homicide, gang units, and SWAT (assignments Dr. Keesee refers to as "gated communities") as well as basic promotional opportunities. "You needed to know someone or have a chief willing to push for diversity of thought and lived experience." When Keesee finished fourth on her first promotional exam for sergeant after months of preparation and attending trainings she had to find on her own, a colleague accused her of having received the answers in advance because she is a Black woman.

She told him "My suggestion for next time is that you study harder. And perhaps an afro wig will help you."

[1] The CROWN Act explicitly classifies natural hair textures and protective styles such as braids, locs, cornrows, twists as protected characteristics under civil rights law, closing a gap that left many Black workers and students vulnerable to discriminatory policies; it has passed in 27 states and the House, though it has yet to clear the Senate and become federal law.

“AND PERHAPS AN AFRO WIG WILL HELP YOU.”

Keesee still finds herself in rooms where the same arguments about women’s “place” are being relitigated, and this is especially true for Black women.

Reflecting on the compound challenges of intersectionality, Dr. Keesee noted “We have to make decisions other people don't have to make. If I act this way, they're going to say it's because of X. If I don't do this, it's going to be because of Y. Negotiating the identity becomes very stressful, but it’s a matter of survival. And I sometimes struggle with the fact that we're still having the same conversations we had 30 something odd years ago when I was in the academy."

“THIS STUFF IS PASSED DOWN.”

"I think we are reluctant to have the honest, true conversations about the norms of an organization that is male dominant."

It isn't that people don't know the rules, she explains, it’s that the norms run deep and started well before people came on the job. "There are some men who have been raised to believe that this is a space for them, and perhaps only for them" she said. "Regardless of how qualified we are, regardless of how smart we are, these narratives are passed down, and It’s a part of the socialization process.”

"And this kind of socialization doesn't just impact how men view the workplace. "Some of my biggest battles have been with people who look like me," Keesee said, "because what I am doing is upsetting what they consider to be the status quo." That being said, Dr. Keesee speaks with genuine respect for the women who came before her, acknowledging they navigated similar challenges under worse conditions and with fewer allies. "I was on with women who came on in the 70s who would look at me having these conversations with colleagues or leadership and would say, 'I would never have said anything like that.' And I understand why. I know the conditions in which they were raised."

"LEARN HOW TO STAND IN YOUR QUIET POWER."

For those who know Dr. Keesee, and especially those who have worked closely with her, her commitment to mentorship is well-understood. 30x30's own Dr. Tanya Meisenholder relied on Dr. Keesee as her mentor when she followed in her footsteps as Deputy Commissioner of Equity and Inclusion at the New York City Police Department. And one of 30x30's latest Profiles in Leadership, Chief Doreen Jokerst the Overland Park Police Department, remains a mentee of Dr. Keesee's and the two still hold regular calls.

When Jokerst was earlier in her career, she was blocked from receiving detective training in her local department. "She called me and said there's a detective opening, but one of the criteria is you have to have detective training, and I can't get it," Keesee recalled. She asked Jokerst two questions: how much vacation time do you have, and how important is this to you? Then she picked up the phone and arranged two weeks of training with Denver PD's investigative units.

When Jokerst applied for the detective position and interviewers challenged her credentials, she was ready. "She said, 'Oh, yes, I do have detective training.' And they're all looking at each other." The training she'd received in Denver exceeded what she would have gotten locally, and there was nothing anyone could say to that.

"I told her, 'learn how to stand in your quiet power,'" Keesee said. "That was a power move. And she moved in it quietly, not in a retaliatory way."

"The mentor's job is to cheer you on when you've got a win," she continued. "And when they see you heading toward the cliff, to stand in front of you and say hey, let's talk about this before you jump."

"WHAT KIND OF OFFICER DO WE NEED TODAY?"

To Dr. Keesee, the most important approach to effecting much-needed, broad-scale culture change in a department is "who you recruit, and what you're actually recruiting for."

"The one lever that you have to pull is the people," she said. She's heard the pushback before, where critics say rethinking standards must mean lowering them. "What gives me pause right now is this notion that standards have to be dropped to improve diversity," she said, reflecting that the false assumption that improved diversity and improved rigor are in tension with each other has been around for decades. Before defaulting to that same argument again, she says departments need to ask a more fundamental question: "What kind of officer do we need today?"

Dr. Keesee notes that our collective understanding of what police do and what it takes to do the job well has evolved dramatically. About four percent of 911 calls involve what she calls "true crime" and incidents like assaults, homicides, accidents, and rarely are officers responding while an incident is in progress. The rest are largely social in nature: mental health crises, domestic disputes, children in neglect, families under financial strain.

"We're still using the same tools to assess [candidates] from the 70s," Keesee said, "and they're not measuring what's most important. The skill I most want police to have is the ability to communicate, and I would add, communication interwoven with empathy. Who I'm looking for are people with compassion and lived experiences who can step into a call and say 'I get this. I've been here.'"

"WHAT KIND OF OFFICER DO WE NEED TODAY?"

Dr. Keesee notes the important role of training as well. "We're the worst listeners ever, right? We're so busy, and we train officers to come up with a response before the person is even finished talking. And it's usually a defensive response, as opposed to taking the first thirty seconds and just hearing what they have to say and what they actually need."

And none of it matters, she continues, without a fundamental shift in how departments understand their relationship with the communities they serve. "The organization needs to center the public safety needs of a community," she said. "That requires a shift in focus. And it also requires a shift in power. And power is something cops don't ever want to let go of."

"THERE HAS TO BE A TRANSITION PLAN."

Keesee also reflected on how much energy, time, and money has been spent on transforming the profession, and how rarely those changes stick. She's seen the enthusiasm in rooms full of motivated leaders, and she's also watched as that enthusiasm fades when the difficult work of leading an organization through change sets in. "I call it the after-conference club," she said. "Everybody leaves fired up. We're going to do this, we're going to change things. And that lasts about two weeks. Then it's back to the same old thing."

The pattern repeated itself at a larger scale in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Departments held listening sessions. Officers and community members showed up and said hard, important things. Documents were produced. "Beautiful documents," she said. "And then nothing happened. Nothing was done with it." The sessions, she notes, became an end in themselves, a way for institutions to demonstrate responsiveness without requiring anything to actually change. "They're exercises," she said simply.

Publication Date: March 2026

“THERE HAS TO BE A TRANSITION PLAN.”

What's missing in Dr. Keesee’s view isn't effort or ideas of what to do differently and better, which is where most people spend their time. It's in sustainability and the commitment to hold leadership accountable to the changes they've endorsed long after the initial energy has faded. "There has to be an implementation plan, and a transition plan. You have to have chiefs who stay long enough and are held accountable to the work. And there never is a transition. Most just hit the door, or when they feel the heat, they're gone."

"I do believe things can and will improve,” she clarifies. “But we have to be strategic and understand that this is not just about policy. This is about cultures and structures and beyond that, it’s about human beings.”

"What keeps me excited about the future," she said, "is that no matter the turmoil we've got going on at whatever level, there are always people on the ground actually doing the good work."

"AND THE STORIES WE TELL HELP US KEEP THAT MOMENTUM GOING."

ABOUT 30X30

The 30×30 Initiative is a coalition of police leaders, researchers, and professional organizations committed to advancing and supporting women in law enforcement, both in the U.S. and beyond.

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30x30 Initiative

The State of the 30x30 Initiative - 2025 Impact Report

LinkedIn: 30x30 Initiative

30 FORWARD

30Forward is a Canadian initiative inspired by 30×30, advancing and supporting women in policing through research, collaboration, and culture change.

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