

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Addressing the Shortage of Police Officers:  
Civilianizing Some Traditional Duties of the Sworn Officer**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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## **ABSTRACT**

With the latest census figures showing a population shift from the Northeast and Midwest to the South, one state in particular, Texas, has seen double-digit increases in its population. This growth is expected to continue for the next 40 years along with a population shift from rural areas to the urban/suburban centers (Office of the Texas Comptroller, 2010). Some cities are struggling to meet the challenges of the growth especially when it comes to public safety. The result is a growing demand for qualified people to fill the ranks of law enforcement. Unfortunately, the demand is outstripping supply. One factor contributing to the problem is competition amongst cities for applicants. Not only are police departments competing for the qualified applicants with each other, they are also finding themselves competing with state and federal agencies, where benefits and pay are usually better. Police departments are now finding themselves with a shortage of sworn personnel to respond to and investigate crimes.

The shorted departments have responded in various ways, from cutting back police services to prioritizing call response and even hiring more civilians to assist sworn personnel with non-enforcement tasks. Current acceptance of civilians in the policing profession has already taken place with neighborhood watch groups, school and mall monitors, crime prevention organizations, and patrols of public areas by citizens. Once a staple of a sworn officer's duties, non-enforcement work, such as writing reports, dusting for prints, photographing, and collecting evidence, is now being assigned to trained civilians.

Compared to the dwindling numbers of qualified applicants for sworn positions, the civilian applicant pool is nearly limitless; this is due to less stringent qualifications,

less training, and usually no licensing requirements. An added benefit is cost: training and equipping a civilian costs a fraction of the amount in money as compared to putting a sworn person on the streets. The time to train a civilian is also much less, which results in an almost immediate contribution to the department as opposed to the months of training for an officer and no guarantee they will 'make the cut.' Also, equipment costs are minimal for a civilian hires, while each uniformed officer's equipment runs into the hundreds and sometimes thousands.

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's municipalities are facing a shortage of qualified officers due to increasing demand. Agencies have tried to address the shortage by making the job more attractive and expanding recruiting efforts outside of the municipality. Departments have offered sign-on bonuses, higher salaries and benefits, and even lowered standards (i.e. dropping college degree requirements) in an effort to recruit candidates. Unfortunately, the remedies have not been completely successful, so some departments have had to cut police services. These cuts have taken the form of delayed response to non-emergency calls and cancellation of calls deemed non-police matters and calls that traditionally were provided as a courtesy (i.e. assisting stranded and lost motorists). With the demand for police growing, administrators have looked to the past for answers. What they have found is *Civilianization*. Forst (2000) stated that "*Civilianization* refers to a law enforcement agency's hiring of non-sworn personnel to replace or augment its corps of sworn officers, typically with the aims of reducing costs and improving service" (p. 23).

History has shown that using civilians to supplant police in positions, such as parking enforcement, dispatch, telephone operators, records, and the property room, has worked. Some departments have even extended the civilian duties to investigation by allowing a trained civilian to conduct follow-up interviews (Ashe, 2001). This trend toward civilianization will continue to rise: civilian employees working in police departments in 1950 were at a low of 7.5% but rose to 30% in 2006 (Kostelac, 2006). This trend has not only helped cut costs but also freed the sworn personnel for duties where their enforcement powers are needed.

This augmentation of police with civilians helps the community in several ways. With civilians doing the non-enforcement work, there are more officers available for street patrols, which results in higher visibility of the police. A higher police presence in neighborhoods has usually resulted in a safer community (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Officers not tied up on report calls have more time to self-initiate activities, such as traffic enforcement, which makes the roads safer for everyone.

Police have traditionally responded to non-emergency calls, such as assisting at accident scenes where nobody is injured and no traffic hazard exists; however, some departments have cut their uniformed response due to the shortage of sworn personnel. Services, such as assisting lost motorists, funeral escorts, changing flats, and other courtesy calls, are the first to be cut when there are not enough troops. Additionally, the days where the beat officer gets out on foot and develops closer and trusting relationships with the citizens living and working in his area are probably numbered, if not already gone.

Hiring and properly training civilians in areas not traditionally open to them can be accomplished with careful planning. Identifying the positions in a department where a civilian may be useful can be made easier by knowing what positions require full police powers such as the authority to arrest. For example, a report of a burglary at a business where a suspect is not present would most likely require no police powers. Such a call would require processing the scene for evidence and a report, which are tasks that would take an inordinate amount of time if done properly. Responding to a report of a burglary would require arrest powers if the suspect is still present; however, what officers usually respond to is a crime scene where the suspect has long since fled.

The subsequent report may take as little as a half hour to as long as a couple of hours. Utilizing a civilian in lieu of an officer to respond to a 'report call' can keep that officer on his beat and proactively seeking out crime. Using a civilian to also process a crime scene would help keep more officers patrolling the streets.

Taking civilianization even further by providing a uniform would allow more expansion of where a civilian could be useful: a uniformed civilian could be just as effective at directing traffic as a uniformed officer but cost much less. These same civilians could respond to minor accidents where only an exchange of insurance information amongst the parties is required. Putting a civilian in uniform would also make the civilian more identifiable to the public as a government employee.

There are many tasks that sworn personnel currently do that keep them away from enforcement activity and away from criminals. Criminals are emboldened when there is a lack of police presence, and the result can be more crime. As city budgets become tighter, so, too, must police agencies' budgets: "The current insecurity in the economic future of most agencies has driven even more agencies to explore the possibilities of utilizing civilians in traditionally sworn roles; an option already considered a trend for the future of law enforcement" (Frazier, 2003, p. 12). With the need for more police on the rise, there is a need to find alternatives and to do more with less. Hiring civilians may be the answer: there is no shortage of them, they cost less to the department, there is less training for them, and there are no stringent hiring requirements. Above all, a civilian hired in a support capacity to the police department has the same goal as a police officer: serving the community.

## POSITION

The majority of police work is public service, and during a typical shift, police are often dispatched to calls for service that usually do not require police powers, such as a use of force or making an arrest. Responses to these calls sometimes require a report be made, advice given, or just an ear to lend for someone's complaint. Some of these calls can last for hours, thereby taking up large amounts of a shift. Officers tied up on these 'non-enforcement tasks' cannot respond to other calls for service on their respective beats. Some of these other calls are emergencies and require a unit from another district respond; that district is now left without a patrol, and when an emergency call comes from that district, it requires another non-district officer to respond. This 'domino effect' results in longer response times and occurs most often during busier times of the shift (i.e. morning and afternoon rush hours, Friday and Saturday nights).

Having a civilian assigned to report writing calls and other non-enforcement type calls would help the beat officer keep up with the calls on his district and lessen the 'domino effect.' Frazier (2003), a civilian Division Commander for the Tustin Police Department (California) had this to say: "We gained the ability to rethink deployment and assignment of sworn personnel, by freeing them from time consuming tasks and functions not requiring "peace officer powers" (p. 15). The Tustin Police Department noted that calls where a report was written by a sworn officer dropped; they found that the average officer wrote 1.2 reports in a shift while a civilian hire averaged 3.5 reports.

One of the reasons that police departments cannot hire enough police officers is due to the strict licensing requirements. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) mandates that no less than 618 hours of training be needed to take the peace officer examination ("Timeline of legislation," n.d.). Interested applicants are scrutinized carefully through a thorough background investigation. These investigations include looking into an applicant's criminal, driving, drug, credit, employment, and relationship history. Police applicants can expect the written application itself to consist of in-depth questions regarding their personal history, to include education, jobs, family, finances, medical, psychological, and criminal background. The application process itself takes months and consists of written, physical, psychological, and oral exams, as well as drug tests, interviews, and a polygraph exam. Once they successfully complete the application process, they may be accepted into the academy, where they will undergo several months of training. After graduating from the academy, the new officer is paired with a training officer for another several months. It is very common to have more than half of all applicants drop out or be disqualified in various stages of the hiring process. This attrition rate shrinks the applicant pool further.

On the other hand, the requirements and qualifications for a person in a non-certified position are not as strict. A person applying for a civilian non-law enforcement position could expect the employment process to consist of a basic background check and interview before an offer of employment is made. A polygraph, physical fitness, medical, and psychiatric exam, normal standards required to hire a person for a law enforcement position (City of Lubbock, n.d.), would not be required for a civilian (City of Lubbock, 2009). In addition, graduation from a months-long training academy would not be needed to qualify a person for a non-law enforcement position.

Another point would be the cost factor involved in hiring and training a civilian when compared to a police officer. The high costs involved in giving an entrance exam, hiring background investigators, and physical and psychological exams are a necessity to hiring a police officer; however, the civilian hire does not generate these costs. A police applicant will require months of paid training before he will be a productive member of the organization; a civilian's contribution to the organization may be felt almost immediately, especially if on-the-job training is conducted.

Heininger and Urbanek (1983) noted that "Personnel costs typically account for 80 to 90 percent of all police expenditures..." (p. 204). Police officers in low supply can and do demand higher wages and better benefits. Since a city's budget is finite, the city must either raise taxes, an unpopular decision that negatively affects public opinion, or cut costs in other areas to make up the difference. The preferred choice is to cut costs. These cuts have resulted in diminished city services and lower wages for other city employees. The average salary of a civilian employed by a police agency has been shown to be about half to one third that of a police officer (Harring, 1981). An unexpected benefit of this is that the police department budget is left with extra funds, which may be used to purchase new equipment or pay for extra training. Departments that have hired and trained civilians to augment the sworn ranks have seen impressive savings when it comes to costs: smaller salaries, retirement, and benefits are the result (Frazier, 2003).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Criticism against further civilianizing police departments comes from two fronts: one from within the organization itself and the other from the general public. Snow

(1989) stated, "Officers often resent civilians moving to jobs that have historically been held by police officers" (p. 60). Two reasons are given for the resentment: job security and police solidarity.

The civilian could never replace the police officer because they do not have the skills, training, or licensed authority. The reality is that civilians are hired in a support capacity to the police; their job is meant to help the sworn ranks use their skills and training more effectively by being available for proactive policing, calls for service, and crimes in progress. The goals and mission of the department are the same for both civilian and sworn personnel, and the ultimate goal is to make the community safer, thereby raising the quality of life for everyone.

Police solidarity or the 'Thin blue line' describes the camaraderie that police feel with each other (blue uniforms) and not everyone else (civilians and criminals alike). Every officer entering the service understands that the work is difficult and sometimes dangerous, and his life may depend on his fellow officer. Training for the law enforcement profession involves a great deal of teamwork and prepares the recruit for the streets where he will sometimes have to entrust his welfare to his fellow officers and vice versa. Friendships, along with trust, are built during this training not only amongst the students but also with the officer-instructors who often teach the classes. A new civilian working with the rank and file would not only be considered an outsider, but he would not be trusted. The civilian is not one of 'them' and did not go through the same relationship building that occurred in the academy. This lack of trust is present because police sometimes find themselves in the streets in highly unpredictable but potentially

dangerous encounters with civilians whom they cannot identify in advance as a threat, so they naturally are suspicious of everyone (Green, 1996).

Rejection by the community of civilians responding to what was normally a police function is another concern. This stems from the fear of change that usually accompanies different or unusual ideas that infringe on traditional 'way-of-doing-things.' The police officer can be described as the 'Swiss-Army-Knife' of problem solving. The public has been ingrained at an early age that a police officer can help them, and most can recall a time when their parents told them to look for a police officer if they ever got lost. Regardless of age, there is probably nothing more comforting to a person needing help than to see a uniformed officer. No matter what time of the day it is, the public can call the police for help and expect that a uniformed officer will be sent. It is what has been taught in American society.

The key to keeping the rejection minimal is making sure the community understands the reasons for further civilianization. A well-organized plan (including public service announcements) introducing the public to further civilianization in the police department can help with acceptance. Graduating the civilian into the community with narrowly defined responsibilities and increasing the responsibilities over time would also further the goal of acceptance. Furthermore, explaining to the community that there would actually be more officers available for emergency service calls and crime prevention because of civilianization would go a long way toward community support.

## **CONCLUSION**

Strict hiring and licensing requirements for police officers keep applicant pools small, which challenges departments to keep their sworn ranks filled. As police

departments face the challenges, they are restructuring themselves in the changing economy and workplace, and civilianization is an important aspect of that transformation (Kostelac, 2008). When a department responds to the shortage with better pay and benefits, the cost increase takes away from the overall budget. Since departments cannot continuously raise salary and benefits to attract and hire more police, they must find new and innovative ways to continue their mission with the sworn personnel they have. One of these ways is through civilianization, which allows a department to use non-sworn personnel to operate in the field alongside sworn personnel; however, the difference is that the civilian would require no police enforcement powers.

Over the past few decades, the civilian has been accepted into the police culture to assist with duties once done by sworn personnel. Civilians employed in today's departments are not only dispatching and record keeping but also writing reports. Civilianization to support the police function can be expanded to include putting the civilian in a car and in the field. The civilian can take over the non-enforcement type work normally done by sworn personnel (in the field), thereby 'freeing up' these officers for work more consistent with their police powers. Critics have argued that police positions are being taken over by civilians when, in fact, the civilians are merely taking over *non-enforcement tasks* previously handled by police, which keeps police free from non-enforcement tasks and allows more police service to the community. Explaining to the public why civilianization is needed and what it can do for them will help the community understand, thereby making it easier for them to accept.

Police departments should consider hiring more civilians for the non-enforcement work that police officers currently are responsible for because today's officer has

become reactionary. He is mostly reacting to calls for service and leaving areas of the community without a proactive police presence. As populations continue to rise, there is a growing demand for more police. This demand has outstripped the supply of qualified applicants to the point that municipalities are cutting back services to cope with rising salaries in the police profession. These stopgap measures have reached the breaking point, requiring police departments to think of other ways to tackle the problem. History has shown that duties, once the responsibility of the sworn officer, have successfully been civilianized: dispatching, record keeping, and parking enforcement are examples of such. When departments identify and relegate more of these duties to the civilian, they are freeing up their sworn personnel for the police duties they were hired and trained for: law enforcement.

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