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Sufficient Funding of Small Police Departments

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the necessity for small governments to provide adequate funding for their police departments. Improper funding can result in inadequate and insufficient supplies and equipment, inability for officers to complete mandated training, lack of incentives and salary to attract and retain a good pool of applicants, and the inception of low morale and unconstructive work environments. It is incumbent upon small governments to provide adequate funding to enable the hiring and retention of highly qualified applicants.

If severe funding problems prevents agencies from sending officers to state mandated training, both officers and departments face penalties. Moreover, if officers cannot become certified with specialized skills, officers may feel they are prevented from maximizing their skills to their full potential. This lack of opportunity can result in low morale and officers might seek employment with larger agencies that can cultivate these untapped skills. There are a few things small agencies can do to attract and retain officers even with limited funding. City and county governments must anticipate police department requirements. With good planning, frivolous expenditures can be reduced. Grants can be utilized to provide funding for equipment, training, and other police needs. Smaller governments are also capable of providing community interaction whereby officers become connected to the communities they serve. With effective planning, these initiatives can be achieved so officers will prefer to remain with their departments.

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INTRODUCTION

When a new recruit goes to a department to apply for a job, some of the things he considers are officer pay and a career plan where he can see future earnings with that department. Applicants may compare what departments offer in terms of pay, benefits and incentives. One challenge for small departments is that they compete with larger agencies and other smaller departments who are able to provide outstanding benefits. With some larger departments, incentive pay is assigned to different positions or duties. These duties can include things like motorcycle patrol, bike patrol, helicopter pilot, shift differential, foreign language skills, mounted police patrol, and K-9 handler. Many smaller agencies often do not have a lot of these special assignments, thus the struggle for these departments to provide incentive pay to help recruit and retain officers becomes a lengthy process, which can take months to complete.

Many small agencies are often unable to provide incentives due to lack of funding. It is safe to presume that many agencies would like to seek candidates who are critical thinkers and decision makers, educated, professional, and will invest their time and effort in those agencies. Departments with funding issues may have no choice but to employ candidates who might have little or no college, may not be motivated, and may not be vested for long term employment in the department for which they are hired. Additionally, if these candidates do have college degrees, they might tend to eventually look elsewhere for departments that offer higher pay and more opportunities. These lower-funded departments become places where officers receive on-the-job training before moving on to permanent placements in larger agencies.

In order to have an educated, professional department and encourage applicants with similar qualities to apply at small departments, it is imperative that potential employees be compensated adequately and fairly. Many police candidates who have obtained college degrees might seek to be employed with an agency where they will be challenged and serve a purpose, and not just earn a paycheck. These applicants will likely want to invest in a department that will invest in them. Small police departments should be provided with sufficient funding to be able to hire and retain highly qualified applicants.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of funding in the hiring of new applicants. In addition, where funding is limited, there are ways to foster positive morale and motivation for officers to feel productive and who will prefer to remain at these departments until they are able to promote. Ultimately, the retention of officers is the overall goal, especially for small departments. This will establish a department where officers wish to remain, which, in turn, will also save the department money in hiring and training costs.

POSITION

With many small agencies, one of the challenges is issuing uniforms and equipping new hires. Some small agencies cannot provide new officers with uniforms. These agencies will have a closet full of former officers used uniforms and ask them to try some on and see if they fit. Some agencies cannot provide new hires with body armor (bullet proof vests). Surprisingly, some agencies cannot even provide duty weapons for new hires. New hires at these agencies can use their own gun, provided they can qualify with it. The cost of training them and providing a Field Training Officer

(FTO) is also taken into account when placing a new hire on the street. Therefore, some agencies that do not have a field training program just simply hand a new hire a map book and say “good luck.” The smaller agencies that are unable to provide uniforms and/or equipment, may save money, but have higher liability issues. New hires that provide their own equipment may not meet the current street standards and may end up hurting themselves or another person. For agencies that do provide uniforms and/or equipment, “it can cost almost twice their starting salary” (Cohen, 1986, para.1). Normally, new hires do not have money to provide their own equipment. The cost of the academy and books, along with supporting a family, can wipe out any monies they had, including a savings account.

This poses a problem with cities and counties that do not make their police departments a priority. For this very reason, it is important to focus on officer retention when they successfully pass their probationary periods. Once these officers pass their probationary periods, they are required to take state mandated courses. Police departments typically pay the cost of these courses, however if they are unable to pay for them, the cost becomes the responsibility of the officer. If funding is not properly allocated for these courses, the officer and department could face with disciplinary action from the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE). TCOLE clearly states “section 1701.501 provides that TCOLE may establish procedures for the revocation of licenses, suspensions of licenses and reprimands to licensees or adopt other necessary enforcement procedures for a violation of Chapter 1701, Occupations Code, or a TCOLE rule. Rules 223.15 and 223.19 contain provisions for these actions” (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, 2018, para. 30). Action taken could be the

suspension of the officer's license for failure to complete the training mandates for that training session, resulting in loss of manpower due to his suspension.

Departments also face disciplinary action if their officers do not attend these state mandated courses by way of misdemeanor fines. TCOLE states "all individuals that do not meet all continuing education requirements during the 24 month training units or the 48 month training cycle are subject to administrative action on the last day of the unit or cycle (Rule 217.11(j))" (TCLEOSE, 2012, p.22). Department heads must remember that keeping someone on a department if they are not licensed can and will incur criminal penalties (TCLEOSE, 2012, p.22). Along with fines, a department that faces disciplinary action risks losing its ability to apply for and/or receive state and federal grants, which can provide much needed monetary relief for police departments. Further, as stated by TCOLE, "anyone whose license is suspended must meet the current licensing standards, complete the current training cycle's continuing education requirements, and submit an application with the required reinstatement fee for each license held to have the license(s) reinstated (Rule 223.17)" (TCLEOSE, 2012, p.22). Officers in non-compliance are forbidden from returning to work until all licensing requirements have been met. In the meantime, small departments are burdened by this loss of manpower.

When an officer is in non-compliance with the mandated training and is prohibited from working, other officers are then required to fill in the vacant shift requiring overtime pay- an additional expense to the city or county. As a result, the existing officers become frustrated and overworked, which, over time, can lead to separation from the department. On small agencies, this situation is a very real

concern. Karen Michael from the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal states that “Wolfforth Police Department has had two positions vacant since Thanksgiving” (Michael, 2014, p.1). She follows with, “having fewer officers affects the department’s ability to send officers away for training or allow vacation time” (Michael, 2014, p.1). With no relief in sight, the cycle begins with officers seeking positions with other departments simply to relieve the stress of being overworked. This, in conjunction with the possibility that their departments are unable to send them to required schools, only fuels their motivation to find an employer that makes their police department and its officers a priority.

One way to attract applicants and retain them at smaller agencies is to develop an advertised, clear plan for incentives and promotions. When agencies provide these, applicants are then able to view opportunities available to them for their years of service. It is imperative that small agencies provide a way to fund incentives so that applicants can then more fairly consider them along with larger surrounding agencies. In Huntersville, North Carolina, the town implemented a plan whereby officers receive incentive pay for Associate’s and Bachelor’s degrees. They also included incentive pay for officers who live within the town’s limits. Town Manager, Greg Ferguson, said of the new plan in November 2012, “It’s an incentive for [police officers] to earn extra money, stay with the town for a number of years and pursue a higher education” (Burns, 2012, para. 6). Then Police Chief Philip Potter continued with “The whole reason [for the pay plan] is for recruiting and retaining the most qualified and professional candidates” (Burns, 2012, para. 8). With competing agencies in the surrounding area, this type of plan would boost officer morale and further strengthen the trust that the community needs to have with its police department. This community trust is based on the

knowledge that their officers are well educated and trained. A police agency with a supportive and favorable reputation itself serves as a way to recruit more qualified applicants from places beyond the scope of the typical recruiting pool. Applicants from all over the state would look to agencies that acknowledge and value the men and women who serve it. Prioritizing funding to foster these values would go a long way to developing a well respected, professional department.

Being a police officer is a calling: people do not get rich in this field. When emergencies arise, police officers run toward the danger, while everyone else runs away from it. Many people who *might* show interest in this field may look at salary scales and decide that risking their lives every day is not worth the salaries offered. Small agencies have the added challenge of competing with salary and benefits provided by large police departments. Yet large departments, like the Houston Police Department, are also having difficulty finding men and women interested in law enforcement. Recently the city council approved incentive pay in hopes of attracting applicants. James Pinkerton from the Houston Chronicle states that “new police cadets in May can begin collecting a \$5,000 bonus to join the Houston Police Department, after the City Council on Wednesday approved incentive pay to boost the sagging interest” (Pinkerton, 2014, para.1). Officers from smaller agencies that compete with large agencies like Houston would find bonuses like these very appealing. For this very reason, small agencies must provide additional means to attract and keep their officers.

Along with equipping and training new hires and providing incentives for existing officers, it is incumbent upon small cities and counties to provide positive and professional workplaces to retain good officers. In-service training helps officers

continue to develop skills providing him with the necessary tools needed to perform his duties. It is also used to ensure that state mandatory training is completed. The training and opportunities provided by a department enables officers to utilize skills gained as much as possible. All of this contributes to the officer's sense of purpose and favorable morale toward the department. According to Elinor Robin, PhD., a mediation expert who specializes in conflict management, employers should provide "employees with training and development opportunities so that they can learn and grow. And, as they develop [employers should] challenge them to set and meet high expectations" (Robin, 2010, para. 8). When an officer feels that he makes a useful contribution to his department and is simultaneously needed by the community, he develops a meaningful bond to the organization and community that he serves. Officers who have this connection are less likely to leave their departments to seek jobs elsewhere.

COUNTER POSITION

Initially most city and county government leaders would probably say that funding a police department takes priority. However, when it comes down to allocating funds to various city or county departments, police departments do not always come at the top of the list in terms of fund disbursement. In large part this is due to many of these governmental bodies doing a poor job of anticipating future costs of a functioning police department. Poor budgeting for things like liability insurance, vehicle maintenance, electronic equipment, body armor, office equipment and supplies, officer training, etc., can result in hiring freezes, temporary halt of promotions and incentives, and in the worst cases, officer layoffs. In the *Guidelines for Starting and Operating a New Police Department* provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, police officials serving as an

advisory group to cities seeking to start new departments suggested that cities “be sure forecasts of future city/town revenue are accurate. We anticipated more revenue, did not get it, and the decrease in services and accountability is...acute” (Spence, Webster, & Connors, 2006, p.19). In order to prevent this type of budget shortfall, better prognostication of department needs should be made. Furthermore, the same advisory group suggests that “you have both political and grassroots community support, and make sure your community can afford to sustain a department over the long term” (Spence et al., 2006, p. 20). Politicians and community leaders must work together to ensure the safe operation and sustainability of a police department to serve the community best.

An additional reason for insufficient funding, and one that affects police departments all across the country, is that of the current U.S. economy. Larger departments that have been able to avoid the cuts that smaller agencies have faced more readily are now dealing with city and county governments that are cutting, among other things, civilian personnel, training budget, equipment budget and calls for service that are less serious in nature. In 2011, Brian Freskos, reports that “despite its label as one of the nation’s most crime-ridden cities, Camden, N.J., laid off nearly half its police force” (Freskos, 2011, p.1) due to severe loss of revenue. Politicians, in attempts not to appear “soft on crime,” avoided making any cuts at all on police departments even though they knew that reductions in spending could not be avoided for long. In Wilmington, North Carolina, similar cuts were made. Freskos continues saying, “training has been scaled back. There have been no merit pay increases or cost-of-living adjustments for the past two years. And officers, like other city employees, saw

their 401k contributions slashed 2 percent" (Freskos, 2011, p. 2). Wilmington Chief of Police Ralph M. Evangelous states that this is "not a big issue for a short period of time, but it will have a dramatic effect long term,' adding that equipment will start breaking, officers will fall behind on best practices and employees may leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere" (Freskos, 2011, p.2). In these situations, even officers who love their jobs and are dedicated to their communities will likely seek positions with agencies that are not as fiscally strained- or they may leave the profession entirely for better prospects. However, it is possible that some of these drastic effects are things that could be avoided if governing bodies make attempts to think ahead in regards to their fiscal responsibilities.

The state of the nation's economy is not something that individual departments can necessarily predict how, or to what extent, they might be affected. But looking to the future and anticipating how to curb spending, or finding additional sources of revenue, could help police departments minimize unnecessary spending. Proper forecasting of budgetary trends will help anticipate future cuts. This practice can stop frivolous spending across all city departments, not just police, in order for city governments to be better prepared for economic roller coasters. Freskos states that "since the economic crisis, more departments have more actively sought grant funding to bolster their police forces" (Freskos, 2011, p.4). These grants can purchase equipment, hire new officers, and provide overtime for programs designed to provide highway and roadway traffic enforcement. The Texas Department of Transportation funds such programs. Texas Department of Transportation (2018) "provides grant programs to support the mission of the Texas Traffic Safety Program" (para.1). Taking

advantage of monies the state does provide by way of grants is an opportunity on which all small agencies should capitalize.

One item of importance for all officers is the need for vests, which can run approximately \$800 per vest. This is a large amount of money for small departments facing economic crisis. The U.S. Department of Justice implements a program called *Bulletproof Vest Partnership* (BVP), that can help offset the enormous, but essential, cost of vests. This “initiative is designed to provide a critical resource to state and local law enforcement” (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.a, para. 1). The Department of Justice recognizes that vests are costly, but necessary to save lives. “Based on data collected and recorded by BJA staff, in FY 2012, protective vests were directly attributable to saving the lives of at least 33 law enforcement and corrections officers, in 20 different states” (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.b, para. 2). However, in order to take advantage of this and other available grants, it is essential for police departments, and governing bodies, to plan ahead when requesting funding because the application, approval, and acquisition processes take time before they come to fruition.

For example, with the BVP, departments apply for the number of vests needed. Approval can take approximately three to four months. If approved, the department must purchase, *in full*, vests approved by designated vendors for this grant. Once the vests are received, departments submit the receipt to the organization. The department will then receive payment for half cost of the vests. Grants, like this one, are a tremendous help to smaller agencies. But without future anticipation of possible financial needs and losses, police departments wind up dealing with other more pressing needs that take priority because departments are running in “crisis mode.” In

addition, good record keeping is a must when applying for grants; the BVP requires grantees “to keep documentation to support the BVP vest application and payment requests for at least a three year period” (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.c, para.6). Departments may not necessarily be in that mindset if other “more critical” issues are at the forefront.

Grants provide an excellent way to supplement monies for department expenses from equipment, to vehicle purchases, to technology, to hiring of officers. However, researching and applying for grants takes time and patience because all grants have requirements that must be met, or have specific guidelines departments must follow, records that must be kept, and/or data that must be collected. For example, the *Bulletproof Vest Partnership* states “the jurisdiction will then need to request payment on behalf of the LEA (law enforcement agency)” (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.d, para.1) *after* the arrival of vests at the department. Departments and their governing bodies must anticipate future needs. They must face potential challenges head on, rather than ignore inevitable repercussions thereby becoming forced “to embrace a new, dismal fiscal reality” (Freskos, 2011, p. 1), which is significantly more damaging to all departments and the communities they serve.

RECOMMENDATION

Small agencies have an added challenge, compared with large agencies, in attracting qualified applicants and retaining successful officers due to limited funding and provision of incentives. To compete with large agencies, small agencies must include other means, in addition to competitive pay, to keep motivated and dedicated officers. Funding *must* be provided to small agencies so that officers will want to remain

there and not seek employment with other agencies for higher pay or better incentives. In the long run, spending money to seek and keep officers on a department is more cost effective than hiring and training new officers.

Providing fair compensation, including provision of equipment and uniforms, is costly to new officers right out of the academy or college. These basic supplies will cause potential applicants to keep looking at other departments so they can save money they do not have. Departments that advertise clear plans for promotions and incentives will also aid in attracting new officers. When a potential new hire is able to see how they can advance in a department, or how they can attain incentives, they are also more likely to stick around for the long haul. Officers, especially ones with young families, will want to stay with departments where there is opportunity for advancement and increase in pay.

In addition, providing officers with ongoing training and opportunities for them to discover and utilize specialized skills assists in officers' sense of purpose and connection with their departments. Officers who are able to connect with the communities they serve and engage with citizens alongside their fellow officers are more likely to stay with these departments because they foster positive morale. Departments' focus on this favorable morale amongst its employees will reap rewards both fiscally and publicly in that people will *want* to work in an environment where employees are valued. Furthermore, citizens will support their police department if they feel the officers are educated, professional and vested in serving their community.

Faulty planning in provision of police department needs by city and county governing bodies will result in catastrophic consequences for the department and

communities they serve. Neglecting to consider the cost of growth of a city or town is irresponsible. It is also injudicious not to account for continuous maintenance of police equipment, technology, and supplies. This can present serious liability to the department as well as its citizens. Yet, there are resources available to police departments in the form of grants that will assist in providing what departments cannot fund. Conscientious planning in the application and acquirement of these grants requires knowledge of need, good record keeping, and acknowledgement of fiscal realities.

All agencies, large and small, will be faced with challenges in funding for one reason or another, especially in today's economy. Ultimately the viability of a police department rests on the community leaders and its citizens. Small departments typically have fewer resources available to them. For this reason, governing bodies need to remain mindful of the type of department they want to have. If they want a professional, dedicated, loyal, and knowledgeable department, which *should* be the ultimate goal of all communities, then they need to invest in their officers so that they will not look elsewhere for compensation and opportunities they could receive at "home." Most research suggests that if officers feel valued and needed at their departments, they will not be so quick to leave even for financial compensation. Salary is an important factor, but compensation can be provided through other incentives, a sense of purpose, and bonds with community.

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