

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**SWAT Management:  
Assessing the Need for Standardization in Mid-size Police  
Department's SWAT Teams**

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

According to the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association, there are 115 SWAT teams registered with the association (TTPOA, n.d.). Research into the exact number of SWAT teams in the state of Texas revealed there is no exact data. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how many teams in the state are in compliance with industry standards. There should be a minimum standard for the management of SWAT teams. Standards in the SWAT profession is the next logical step in professionalizing SWAT teams in Texas, which would ensure the delivery of efficient emergency services. The National Tactical Officer Association (NTOA) (2008) stated that “SWAT standards serve as an efficient core set of concepts, principles and policies to standardize and enhance the delivery of tactical law enforcement services” (p.V).

This paper discusses three primary oppositions to minimal standards for SWAT teams and how to resolve those conflicts. In addition, the paper discusses the minimum standard requirements, such as written policies, operational planning, personnel, equipment, and training. The purpose is also to address the issue of standardizing standards for part-time SWAT teams in the state of Texas. These minimal standards are necessary for SWAT management and are important to the success of SWAT teams in Texas to save lives in critical incidents. The author reviewed newspaper articles, internet sites, magazines, books, and journals to support the conclusion. The recommendation is based upon research that standards would professionalize the SWAT industry in alignment with other professions.

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## INTRODUCTION

In September of 2000, a young boy was accidentally shot by police officers in California while serving a high risk warrant (California Department of Justice, 2002). Deployment of police agencies Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams usually only occurs in high risk situations, including barricaded suspects, hostage situations, protection of dignitaries, and high risk arrest and search warrants. It was reported by The National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) that “shots are fired in less than 5 percent of SWAT team activities” (California Department of Justice, 2002, p. 2). In April 2001, due in large part to the above incident, the Attorney General Bill Lockyer for the State of California convened a commission in order to study and recommend best practices, operation procedures, staffing, and training for SWAT teams in California (California Department of Justice, 2002). It was this commission, coupled with Presidential Directive-19 (HSPD-19) that began the process of a national SWAT standard by NTOA. The purpose of the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association (TTPOA) (n.d.) is to “bolster the competency, professionalism, and effectiveness of SWAT team personnel around the state by hosting and conducting low cost tactical training using experienced and professional trainers” (para. 2). Due to the efforts of TTPOA, many agencies in the state have benefited from the best recommended practices. However, there are still many agencies that suffer from lack of training, funding, and administrative support.

However, there is justification for more than suggested best practices. In fact, the recommendations should be standards that are adopted by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) and implemented in

police departments across the state. The purpose of this paper is to outline and recommend a minimum set of standards for the management of SWAT teams, particularly in the category of mid-size departments as defined by the Commission of Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). CALEA determined that agency size is defined as the total number of authorized full-time personnel (sworn and non-sworn) assigned to the law enforcement function. There are four categories sizes that range from smaller than 24 employees to more than 300 employees (CALEA 2008). The category in which the research is to be conducted is for the category (C), which is 75 to 299 employees.

There are many issues involved in the management of a SWAT team. The focus of this paper is to primarily address issues faced by part-time teams. Some of the issues include; team capability, training, uniformity of utilization, models of functionality, equipment, leadership, and financial support needed to create and maintain an efficient and capable team. This paper will focus on departments where officers' SWAT duties are a collateral duty. Caneva (2007) stated that "standards are the tools used to identify SWAT operators. They acknowledge measure of comparison for qualitative or quantitative value. Questions emerge when you measure standards from one agency to the next. Should standards differ?" (p. 1). According to the California Department of Justice (2002) and their Commission on SWAT Standards and the recently published report from the NTOA on SWAT Standards for Law Enforcement Agencies (2008), the answer is a definitive no.

There should be a minimal standard for the management of SWAT teams in the state of Texas. Due to the fact that there are various sized agencies with SWAT teams

in Texas, the focus of this research will be mid-sized police departments. The author believes that all agencies should have a minimal standard; however, due to the limitations of this research paper, facts involving larger agencies should be dealt with separately due to numerous issues.

## **POSITION**

President George Bush signed Homeland Security Presidential Directive 19 (HSPD-19) in February 2007, which “establishes a national policy, and calls for the development of a national strategy and implementation plan, on the prevention and detection of, protection against, and response to terrorist use of explosives in the United States” (HSPD 19, 2007, p. 1). With this Presidential Directive, the NTOA recognized the need for bomb squads and SWAT teams to work together. Given the fact that no standards existed in the SWAT community, NTOA developed and established “SWAT Standards to serve as an efficient core set of concepts, principles and policies to standardize and enhance the delivery of tactical law enforcement services” (NTOA, 2008, p. V). It is these standards that should be applied in the management of mid-sized police departments SWAT teams in the State of Texas. A definition of a SWAT team can best be defined by NTOA:

“A Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team is a designated law enforcement team, whose members are recruited, selected, trained, equipped, and assigned to resolve critical incidents involving a threat to public safety which would otherwise exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders and/or investigative units” (NTOA, 2008, p. 2).

In March 2006, a young Virginia doctor was accidentally killed by a SWAT team when an officer’s weapon accidentally discharged during a high risk search warrant.

Professor Peter Kraska from Eastern Kentucky University said the following about the incident:

“I have no problem with using these paramilitary style squad to go after known violent, armed criminals, but it is an extreme tactic to use against other sorts of suspects, there has been an explosion of units in smaller towns and cities, where training and operational standards may not be as high in large cities – a growth he attributes to the hysteria of the country’s war on drugs” (Davis, 2006 p. 2).

With standards, SWAT teams will be better able to train and ensure that tragedies like above do not occur. Meyr (1999) stressed the “importance for planning training programs well in advance of scheduled dates and base training on clearly defined performance standards” (p.57). One of the minimum requirements would mandate that written policies require SWAT teams to establish missions including hostage rescue, barricade suspect, sniper, high-risk warrants, dignitary protection, terrorism response, and other special circumstances that may exceed normal police functions.

A second issue is that mandating standards requires the development of a training policy on curriculum and the time necessary to maintain proficiency in basic skill for part time SWAT officers. The primary missions for part time teams usually includes high risk warrant service and barricaded suspect. However, from time to time, a part time team may be called upon to resolve a hostage rescue. Howe (2005) found that “It is suggested SWAT teams train on the big four tactical operations in law enforcement. The big four are hostage rescue, high risk warrant service, narcotic warrant service, and barricaded person” (p. 136). In all of these responsibilities, a certain level of proficiency must be maintained in order to successfully resolve these critical situations. These various missions require a certain standard of care and training be established in order for part-time teams be successful. This training should consist of development of an

annual training schedule, lesson plans, and management protocols for training that are in line with both NTOA and TTPOA guidelines. These guidelines are developed in the NTOA standards and the TTPOA best practices document. These standards include a mastery of critical skills, certifications, minimum training hours, equipment appropriation and maintenance, personnel selection and retention, physical fitness standards, tactical competencies checklist, management processes, and command post procedures, to name a few.

A third mandated standard involves operational planning and standard operating procedures. Planning processes should include a detailed and written operation order, briefing for all involved personnel, operational rehearsal (time in-sensitive missions), pre-mission inspections, and post mission after action reviews. In congruence with operational planning is team configuration. In order to be successful in a critical incident, NTOA (2008) recommended the following minimum standard in team configuration. SWAT teams should have an organized structure consisting of a team leader, four containment officers, five emergency action officers, five deliberate action officers, and 2 two man precision long rifle officers. The total minimum standard requires 19 officers. This minimum does not take into account various other missions that may occur during a hostage rescue, including vehicle assault teams, multi-entry hostage rescue plans, breaching teams, and distraction teams, which would require a larger number of officers to be successful. NTOA (2008) recommended that where “any single position is not filled because of a shortage of police SWAT personnel, the potential for failure is increased with each tactical position that goes vacant” (p.13). This standard requires a minimum number of officers to conduct a hostage rescue situation, but in large scale



hostage situations, such as the Beslan School Siege, a single hostage rescue team would not suffice. Such a large scale hostage rescue operation would require multi-jurisdictional teams, both laterally and hierarchically throughout local, state, and federal resources. There are many operational part time teams across the country that are successful. There are some part time teams that may become more of a liability than an asset due to organizational lack of support, inconsistent training, or over confidence from past successes. Shelton (1996) stated, "It is well established from research that a response team is desirable for any agency with a potential to deal with violent incidents. Administrators must weigh the threat assessment to their communities to the cost of providing a team" (p. 9). Citizens deserve a well trained, well equipped, properly staffed, and more experienced SWAT team that successfully executes a mission to save lives. Police chiefs, communities, and current SWAT teams must consider these issues in maintaining a SWAT team at their department.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

There are three primary oppositions to minimal standards for SWAT teams in general. This not only applies in Texas but throughout the entire country. There is a belief that outside the SWAT and police community, SWAT teams represent a "disturbing militarization of its civilian law enforcement, along with a dramatic and unsettling rise in the use of paramilitary police units (most commonly called Special Weapons and Tactics, or SWAT) for routine police work" (Balko, 2006, para. 2). This belief opposes the very fact that SWAT teams exist. The second opposition to minimal standards is from within the police organization itself. Inside the culture of the SWAT community, there is an argument that the SWAT profession does not need standards

since police departments do not want their SWAT teams managed or regulated by the state because of a variety of reasons, predominately financial reasons. The final opposition to SWAT standards exists in the executive leadership of police departments.

Balko (2006) argued that SWAT teams are on the increase and terrorize citizens. He stated that “these raids bring unnecessary violence and provocation to nonviolent drug offenders, many of whom were guilty of only misdemeanors” (Balko, 2006, para. 2). Balko made the mistake of generalizing all SWAT teams into the category of conducting operations as routine police work. In fact, police culture refutes this argument simply by the fact that SWAT operations are not routinely made in every agency as compared to a traffic stop, which is routinely made. An example of this includes a representation of the Bryan Police Department’s monthly statistics of SWAT operations as compared to a monthly statistical comparison of traffic stops. In January 2010, the Bryan Police Department conducted three tactical operations as opposed to over 1,391 traffic stops conducted by officers of the department (Bryan Police Department, 2010). For Balko (2006) to state that SWAT operations are routine as compared to daily police operations is fundamentally incorrect. Dr. David Klinger of the University of Missouri-St. Louis conducted a multi-method study in 2007 of police Special Weapons and Tactics Teams in the United States. SWAT teams were evaluated on structure, operation preparations, and use of force. The results indicated that SWAT is less likely to shoot during critical incidents than non-SWAT officers (O’Brien, 2009).

There are SWAT professionals who disagree with standards due to believing that government oversight would not only infringe on local SWAT operations but would also

put taxpayers at risk by not being able to field SWAT teams under the new standards because of cost. In fact, many smaller jurisdictions simply do not have the financial resources to fund a SWAT team capable of performing customary missions like narcotic and high risk arrest/search warrants, barricaded suspects, or hostage rescues.

TechBeat (2009) stated, "The days of the four-man SWAT team are over, and some teams will be forced to combine to meet the standards" (p. 2). Standards require an 18-man team, equipment, and training, but many smaller agencies do not even have an 18-man department. Even medium size agencies find funding and personnel problematic. Shelton (1996) found that "While larger agencies are better equipped to finance SWAT teams, smaller agencies face problems with limited manpower and budgets in organizing a SWAT team" (p. 6). While medium sized agencies exist and qualified personnel and funding are problematic, this does not resolve the issue if a critical incident occurs. These medium sized agencies can find ways to adhere to the NTOA's standards by forming multijurisdictional SWAT teams to combine manpower, resources, equipment, and funding. In the introduction of the NTOA's SWAT Standards (2008), the committee makes the following statement:

"Where size and/or demographics limit the capabilities of an agency, these standards require that multi-jurisdictional resources be combined and coordinated in a manner which is consistent with reliable and safe interventions. Over the last twenty five years, the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) has assisted many law enforcement agencies in developing multi-jurisdictional teams by providing references, documentation and training to facilitate their efforts. The NTOA remains committed and available to any law enforcement agency or its members who require assistance" (NTOA SWAT Standards, xii).

For medium sized departments, manpower and resources should not be an excuse for failing to meeting requirements due to the fact that NTOA stands ready to assist those

departments in forming multi-jurisdictional teams while meeting the NTOA SWAT standards. In Texas, teams also have the benefit of resources from the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association.

Perhaps the greatest issue involving part-time SWAT teams is organizational lack of support. It usually comes in two forms: overt and unintentional. In the overt case, the police executive wants to have a part-time team for liability reasons but views those teams as a necessary evil. The team is usually there on paper, but the executive has no real intention of utilizing the team. The whole concept of SWAT is to save lives. The police executive who does not understand that needs to re-evaluate their position. For example, a chief of a midsize Midwest suburban agency eventually allowed officers to form a tactical team in the early 1990s. They were a well maintained team and trained with a nearby metropolitan SWAT team. However, the chief only wanted a team on paper but had no intention of employing the team. In other words, he “wanted a “paper tiger,” a trained tactical team but one without any teeth” (O'Brien, 2009, p. 2).

An example of an unintentional lack of support arises when police executives send SWAT operators to training with the intention of having a well trained team. During this training, most operators are exposed to the latest industry standard involving hostage situations, barricaded suspects, high risk warrant service, new equipment, and technological advances. The operators go back to their departments and train other officers on the new standard. The team is called to a critical incident and the team leader wants to employ a new tactic or use new equipment during the operation. Many times, it is met with resistance from the incident commander (IC) because the IC has

not been exposed to the training or has never had any training with a SWAT team or a Negotiation Unit.

This scenario may be more common in a medium-sized agency rather than a large metropolitan agency. The solution to this dilemma is getting the critical incident training to these mid-level supervisors on a consistent basis because just as operators must maintain their standards, so should the incident commander. Many times, it is the officers “aggressively seeking information about innovations, within their respective organization and the amount of information and its dissemination is limited without organizational support and managerial initiative” (McCarthy, Mijares, & Perkins, 2008, p. 270). This is an example where the part-time team’s efforts are supported, but for reasons either by neglect or through poor management, practices have been invalidated or undermined. If there are minimum standards not just for operators but also for police executives, then teams can be managed more professionally and provide a service to the communities they serve to ensure safety in critical situations. O’Brian (2009) found that “Professional standards exist to serve as a guide for excellence in virtually every bona fide profession today. They exist to ensure the highest degree of excellence and consistency throughout these respective professions” (p. 2). These standards should apply to the SWAT operator in part-time teams in Texas. Officer and citizen lives depend on it.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is the position of the author that part-time SWAT teams in the state of Texas should be managed with minimum standards. The current standard submitted is the NTOA minimum standards. In Texas, the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association

(2010) suggested best recommended practices and is closely aligned with the minimum standards of NTOA. The NTOA standards are self regulated from agency to agency. The author recommends a course of action to implement a set of minimum standards within the state of Texas for part-time teams. In order to achieve this minimal standard, the standards should be submitted to the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officers Standards. It would proceed through a process much similar to what the Basic SWAT Curriculum underwent in 2003 to implement a minimum standard to certify a Texas Police Officer as a SWAT officer.

According to O'Brien (2009), "The NTOA also realized that the quality of SWAT teams in this country ranges from the fully capable to the marginally capable. So the need to establish minimum capabilities is increasingly apparent" (p. 3). The purpose of this paper is to address the issue of standardizing standards for part-time SWAT teams in the state of Texas. It outlines standards such as purpose, policies, training, selection, and equipment for SWAT teams. Opponents of SWAT teams and standards do not have valid arguments due to the fact there are solutions to their objections. Most of those solutions can be found in the document "SWAT Standards for Law Enforcement Agencies" published by the NTOA in September 2008. This document is divided into ten sections and has solutions for three of the objections to minimal standards.

The NTOA SWAT standards are divided among several areas of specialization for departmental SWAT teams. The SWAT mission must be defined and should incorporate the National Incident Management System in order to be compatible with national established guidelines. Also, risks are inherently part of high risk operations. In order to mitigate unnecessary risk, a risk management concept of analysis should be

applied in areas of training and operations. Personnel positions should be listed and describe the duties of that position, and selection, retention, dismissal, and reinstatement processes should be included in the policy. Also, a training management philosophy should be incorporated, and this includes training safety issues, written lesson plans, and after action reports. Additionally, procedures should be in place to manage equipment including equipment accountability, storage, and maintenance. Team responses and operational protocols should be in place and should delineate command post procedures, containment, long-rifle operations, and initial procedures for initial stabilization procedures by patrol operations. An annual report should be written listing training hours, training given to other agencies and departmental members, and operations conducted, after action reports, and budgetary items. Finally, mutual aid agreements and relationships affecting the team in relation to other jurisdictions should be established.

The need for minimum standards is necessary for part-time teams, and management is an important and relevant to the success of SWAT team's mission to save lives. Even a highly trained and well equipped team is of no use if the police executive refuses to utilize them when justified. Furthermore, given a well trained team, an effective team can only be successful if there is a well trained and competent Incident Commander. When a crisis occurs, the police executive needs a team that is well trained, has the necessary equipment to accomplish the mission safely, and competent leadership. According to Barreto (1988), "experience has indicated that when inadequate resources and tactics are used, deaths and injuries may result unnecessarily among police, hostages, innocent civilians, and suspects" (p. 34).

Minimum SWAT standards should be implemented. The need to have a professional, well equipped, and trained SWAT team respond to a terrorist event is visible in the everyday newspaper headlines. Often, it is the first responders who are targeted by the terrorists. It is in the best interest of all police departments to form partnerships with area agencies, tactical associations, and other resources to adhere to minimum SWAT standards. If this is done, the management of part-time SWAT teams will not only professionalize the occupation, but citizens will benefit by having a safer community. Everyone's expectation is that police will rise to the occasion during a critical incident, but in reality, responders will sink to their level of preparation. Law enforcement should prepare now in order to surpass the public's expectation.



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