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Implementing Incentives to Retain Officers in Smaller Agencies

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**By
Tim Moring**

**Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department
Fair Oaks Ranch, TX
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ABSTRACT

A growing issue for law enforcement leaders in police agencies with 50 or fewer sworn personnel is officer retention. Larger agencies are recruiting trained officers from smaller departments, causing high turnover and budget strain. Hiring and training new officers, or replacement officers, can cause a smaller agency to incur more cost over time. To compete with larger agency opportunities, smaller agencies should implement benefits and incentives to retain officers. Incentives, such as step pay programs and education reimbursement, have been proven to increase retention in police agencies. Reasons why officers are leaving for larger departments are many, but some of the most common are pay and personal growth. By implementing the education reimbursement and step pay programs, smaller agencies can satisfy wayward officers with structure and personal growth. Smaller agencies can also use research to provide information to city leaders on the cost effectiveness of these incentive programs and retaining officers.

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INTRODUCTION

Every year, law enforcement administrators must contend with the continual problem of retaining officers within their department. This issue is especially prevalent in smaller agencies with fewer than 50 sworn personnel. Officer retention in smaller agencies correlates with the fact that larger agencies can provide benefits and aspects of law enforcement that smaller agencies lack.

The research included here will show how officer retention can be linked to several factors, such as compensation, lack of mobility, and lack of support from the upper management. The research will also include several different solutions that can substantially reduce the turnover rate experienced by smaller police agencies. With the implementation of such solutions, smaller agencies can help to recruit and retain officers, resulting in better service to their respective communities. For purposes of this research paper, smaller agencies will be defined as those with fewer than 50 sworn personnel and larger agencies as more than 50.

For years, smaller police agencies have been plagued by high turnover rates. Studies on retention have concluded that the epidemic of officers leaving one agency for another have steadily risen over the past 20 years (Drew, Carless, & Thompson, 2008). Furthermore, reasons cited for the falling retention rates included better pay, more mobility, better incentives, and because the officers felt they could not continue to grow professionally in the smaller department. The lack of retention is a pertinent issue to smaller agencies due to the loss of experience and job knowledge that veteran officers take with them when they leave. Additionally, high turnover rates can cause a serious problem in cost effectiveness for smaller police departments (Drew et al., 2008).

Leaders in small agencies have had a difficult time attempting to stop or slow the outpouring of officers in search of greener pastures. These agency heads have begun to reach out and work with other agencies to gain knowledge on policies and incentives in an attempt to retain their officers. In doing so, law enforcement leaders have found that certain incentives have helped in reducing the amount of officers leaving their agencies. Incentives, such as education reimbursement and salary step plans, help keep these wayward officers on board. By keeping these officers on board, departments have more flexibility in their budgets because they are not wasting money on hiring and training new recruits. Additionally, tenured officers provide better service to their community and agencies through their experience, education, and knowledge. Therefore, smaller agencies should implement incentive programs to help retain officers and compete with larger agencies.

POSITION

A contributing factor for officers leaving one department for another is the officer's salary. Smaller departments are inherently tangled with smaller budgets. Due to these smaller budgets, salaries can be kept to a minimum, or lower than average rate, to compensate for other needed costs. Many small department officers view larger departments as cash cows, and this view can eventually persuade them to leave their smaller department. These cash cow departments have the ability to offer officers better pay with extended benefits.

Large agencies are usually nestled in municipalities of greater than 100,000 people. Due to their larger tax bases, these departments have significantly larger budgets in which to operate. Therefore, they can provide better pay and benefits

towards their officers and in their recruiting than their smaller counterparts. Smaller police agencies usually operate inside a municipality of fewer than 10,000 people. According to the Office of Justice Programs in 2014, approximately 75% of local police agencies in the United States served a population of less than 10,000 residents, and 91% of those local police agencies employ fewer than ten sworn officers (Reaves, 2011). This means that the majority of police agencies in the country are considered smaller agencies and operate under a smaller budget that affects their pay and recruiting. These agencies must remain competitive with the larger agencies that serve the larger populations, especially when it comes to starting pay.

The average difference in starting pay between a larger police agency and smaller agency in 2007 ranged from \$26,600 a year in smaller agencies to \$49,500 in larger agencies (Reaves, 2010). This makes the average starting salary for an entry level officer at \$38,050. With the average starting salary at over \$11,000 per year less than the larger agencies, smaller agencies must be competitive to keep their officers. It would be beneficial for smaller agencies to increase their starting pay to help attract officers.

Smaller agencies must also contend with the pay step plan programs that are available to officers in larger agencies. Smaller agencies often do not have pay step plans available to their officers. Pay step plans offer officers the ability to map out their career within the agency and help to provide motivation for career advancement. This motivation, coupled with the career planning, aide in keeping the officers with their current departments. The ability to guide their careers and structure them around their personal lives is paramount to these officers.

Comparatively, agencies such as the San Antonio Police Department offer guidelines to prospective new recruits that illustrate how they will be paid based off benefits and incentives such as years of service, awards, certificates, training, and so on (SAPD Careers, n.d.). These career building aspects set larger agencies, like the San Antonio Police Department, at an advantage in recruiting and retention. For example, an officer searching for employment could look into the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department. They will find the starting salary for new officers at \$43,492.80 per year (City of Fair Oaks Ranch Texas, 2014). No other information is given for future planning due to the step pay plans not being in place. They can then look into the San Antonio Police department and see, through an interactive website, that an academy graduate will be paid \$47,138 per year (SAPD Careers, n.d.). Then they can calculate, based on years of service and incentives, what they will earn after the academy and further on in their careers. For instance, a five year officer, with an associate's degree, an intermediate license, who speaks Spanish, works night shift, and is a field training officer will earn \$72,732 per year (SAPD Careers, n.d.). Conversely, a five year officer with the same credentials at Fair Oaks Ranch will not know his pay, and without pay step plans, will only see a slight increase in salary due to cost of living increases. Therefore, individuals searching for a career will be more drawn to San Antonio due the ability to plan and map out their career.

With San Antonio being a much larger agency, at 1.3 million residents, than Fair Oaks Ranch, at 6,400 residents, it is easy for them to offer these pay step plans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). However, Fair Oaks Ranch could implement a pay step plan itself that would aide in recruiting and retaining officers with their agency. With this

implementation, it would close the pay advantage gap that larger agencies have over their smaller neighbors.

Gachter, Savage, and Torgler (2013) state that salary accounts for 6% of the reasons officers depart. Although this is a small percentage, agency leaders should not underestimate the impact that salary and step plans have on recruitment and retention. However, while keeping salary and step plans in mind, law enforcement leaders should also focus on another major reason officers are leaving smaller departments. This major reason is the lack of personal and professional growth incentives. In correlation with growth is satisfaction and happiness. A study conducted by Terra (2009) stated that 45% of officers who left their departments did so for better personal growth incentives. In comparing salary to personal growth, personal growth outshines salary every time. That same study showed officers who were unhappy, or lacked to opportunity for growth, left their departments for a mere 5% raise in salary. Conversely, officers who were happy, or had the opportunities to grow, required a 20% or higher raise to entice them to depart (Terra, 2009). Therefore, agency leaders need to create opportunities or policies for both that allow officers to fill this need for growth.

The previously stated studies have shown that an officers' ability to grow, both professionally and personally, is a substantial factor in whether they entertain the idea of leaving for another department. In fact, most of the officers who are now joining the profession are Millennials, those born between 1982 and 2002, and they tend to seek challenges to promote their personal growth (Terra, 2009; Orrick, 2008; Henchey, 2005). Millennials will be the majority of law enforcement officers by the year 2020

(Henchey, 2005). Therefore, a great deal of attention should be placed on personal growth by agency leaders for both veteran officers and new recruits.

Professional growth is that in which an officer has the ability to increase their knowledge and experience to feel as if they are advancing. Being binded into a set of routines, with little to no chance of advancement or growth, is a source of contention to many of the rank and file. Officers tend to become complacent when opportunities are not available to them at their agencies and will begin to seek these challenges at other departments (Orrick, 2008). This is especially true with the Millennial generation. Millennials tend to gravitate towards departments that offer growth and experiences in several areas (Henchey, 2005). Smaller police agencies have the issue of providing growth opportunities, more so than their larger counterparts.

Smaller agencies do not have the ability to offer officers the experience or growth that larger agencies can. Larger agencies have many different sub groups inside their departments that offer officers the ability to work in several different types of law enforcement. Smaller agencies are usually limited to things such as basic patrol or with some small investigative unit. The lack of mobility experienced at smaller agencies is contributing to officers leaving for the larger agencies. To be satisfied and remain with their department, officers need to feel as if they are growing both personally and professionally.

In order for smaller agencies to fulfill this need for personal growth, they should look to implement a means to satisfy these officers. Agencies should look into providing opportunities to officers in the form of programs such as education reimbursement. By providing officers the ability to attend college for free, or at a discounted rate, it would

allow these officers to continue to grow both professionally and personally while retaining them to serve the community. Those officers who work for agencies that do not provide incentives, like education reimbursement, will gravitate towards other departments to find such benefits (Terra, 2009).

Education incentives have proven to provide stability and help retention rates in police agencies. One study has shown that departments that require degrees, or have tuition reimbursement programs, have had improvements in overall officer performance. A study conducted over the past 40 years indicated that departments with education requirements display better overall officer performance and a significant decrease in officer complaints, disciplinary actions, and job related injuries (Bowman, 2006).

Another study conducted in 2002, by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, found that officers possessing only a high school education accounted for 75% of the disciplinary actions of the departments (Clement, Hough, Jones, Mathis, & Simmons, 2007). Conversely, the same study found that those officers possessing a bachelor's degree or higher accounted for only 11% of the disciplinary actions (Clement et al., 2007). These studies indicate that providing and encouraging officers with the means and finances to attend college helps in producing an overall better performing agency. When education incentives are implemented, and personal and professional growth is achieved, officers are more satisfied in their respective departments. Research shows this satisfaction results in increased retention.

COUNTER POSITION

Many city officials, as well as agency heads, believe that education incentives and tuition reimbursements, and pay step plans will cause heavy budgetary issues.

Depending on the relative size of the municipalities and their departments, budgets are generally tight and do not allow a lot of leeway in regards to funding. City officials cite that funding such incentives would be too costly and, therefore, are usually rigid when it comes to providing money for these programs.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, many cities across the country began cutting back on their police budgets. However, the operational costs of police departments has steadily increased at a rate of 8.6% each year for the past 20 years (Gascon & Foglesong, n.d.). These cities have cited the rising costs for police departments as a means to forego any new benefits or incentives that could be provided to the officers.

Providing new benefits can be costly for cities, but what cities must take into account is the substantially higher cost to replace and train a new officer. For example, in 1997, the Phoenix Police Department in Arizona implemented a tuition reimbursement program for their officers. The agency offers \$4,000 per year for officers to attend college and obtain a bachelor's degree. In Redmond City, Washington, the city reimburses up to 100% of tuition costs for officers to attend college, averaging just \$3,300 per year (Terra, 2009). With these departments offering the tuition reimbursements at approximately \$4,000 per year, they are saving much more money than it would cost to train a new officer.

In the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department, the Chief of Police Scott Rubin has estimated the cost to hire, train, and pay a replacement officer. Chief Rubin states replacing an officer would cost the city as follows; \$32,000 for new officer salary for 6 months, \$2,500 for equipment and hiring processes, and \$15,500 for field training costs, totaling \$50,000 to hire and train a replacement officer (S. Rubin, personal

communication, June 10, 2014). This high overall cost far outweighs what the city would pay for education incentives, as evidenced by the Phoenix and Washington education programs. For example, if an officer took six years, at the rate of \$4,000 a year for education to complete their bachelor's degree, it would total \$26,000 less than the cost of replacing an officer. Therefore, cities that are worried about the costs for providing the education incentives would be better suited to implement the policy to save costs.

A separate issue that many city governments are concerned with is why and how investing in an officer's education is a benefit to the community. Many city governments are strapped for funding, as stated previously. Regardless of the lack of funds, many city leaders do not feel that investing in the continual education of officers, or implementing step pay programs is beneficial to the residents of their municipalities.

By investing in education reimbursement and incentives, city officials would be investing in their agencies. This positive return on investment has been proven through studies that education can aid in reducing complaints and disciplinary actions against officers (Clement et al., 2007). Further, studies have also shown that officers possessing a college education also possess better abilities in decision making and problem solving (Orrick, 2008). By investing in education benefits and incentives for officers, city officials will be providing their communities with better educated, better problem solving, and more devoted officers. With great community service being the top priority of any city, this should be a no brainer.

In regards to city officials investing in step pay programs, they will also be saving the local taxpayers' money. By implementing the step pay programs, officers can plan

their law enforcement careers and know what they would need to do to move ahead in the department. City leaders investing in the programs could satisfy a small piece of, what the officers feel as, the city officials caring or appreciating their service (Gachter et al., 2013). Overall, the implementation of the step pay programs would increase officer satisfaction with the department and would then provide a better service to the community, therefore meeting the main goal of any city government.

RECOMMENDATION

It is clear to see that it takes merely two programs, coupled with a small amount of funding to increase retention rates in smaller departments. These smaller agencies, and the city leaders, should look to implement these two incentives to help retain officers. The ultimate goal of any police agency is to provide the community with the best service possible. This is a difficult task if a constant influx of new officers at a high expense is the continual norm.

As stated, the smaller agencies should implement incentives to help retain officers and compete with larger agencies. The implementation of the step pay programs, such as the one the San Antonio Police utilize, will aide in reducing officer turnover and help those officers with enabling their career plans. By allowing the officers to see where they can advance to, it will help in keeping them at their current agencies.

While implementing the step pay programs will help with officer turnover, it is not the most common issue why officers are leaving. The need for personal growth is by far the most frequent reason why officers are leaving their current smaller agencies. By implementing incentives, such as education reimbursement, officers will be able to

obtain this personal growth. Officers that have the benefit of departments providing funding for education will tend to remain with that department.

While the incentives are great, city officials are hesitant to provide the funding for several reasons. One reason being that the funding is expensive. By crunching the numbers and providing the research to back up those numbers, city officials would realize that providing the education benefits and step pay plans for officers is a far more cost effective means of operating. At the current rates, providing education reimbursement would only cost those cities half of what the cost would be to hire and train a replacement officer.

Other cautions that city officials have with providing funding for education and step pay programs is the non-guarantee that the suggested benefits will cause the officers to remain with the department. City officials are hesitant to provide the funding because they do not know what the return will be on their investment. Research has been provided and shows that by implementing the incentives, such as education reimbursement and step pay programs, it produces officers that can better serve the community (Terra, 2009; Clement, 2007; Gachter, 2013; Orrick, 2008; Bowman, 2006). Research has shown a decrease in officer disciplinary actions and citizen complaints. Coupled with the decrease in complaints and disciplinary action is an increase in officer's decision making and problem solving abilities (Orrick, 2008; Terra, 2009; Bowman, 2006). Therefore, more educated and better satisfied officers, results in higher devotion and better service to their residents. City officials could easily begin to have better service provided to their respective communities. By funding the education

reimbursement and step pay programs, officials would receive a greater return on their investments.

Officials could simply begin the process by implementing the step pay program into their departments. They would get an immediate return on this investment as it would create more satisfied officers that could plan and set goals for their future. Further, they could implement the education reimbursement program, much like the ones in Arizona and Washington, and provide \$4,000 a year to each officer for reimbursement in education expenses (Terra, 2009). Officials could monitor this benefit and employ guarantee policies that ensure the investment they have made will create positive returns. City officials could base the amount given to each officer as a quality control method. For example, the officer would receive 100% reimbursement for grades in the A average, 75% for grades in the B average, and 50% for grades in the C average. All grades below the level of a C average would not be reimbursed. This guarantees that the city's investment into the officers is not wasted and further provides a safety net for the city from officers that attempt to take advantage of the benefit. Meaning, officers who only wish to receive the benefit, but do not put forth the effort for their education, would not remain in the program and the costs would not be incurred by the city.

Overall, smaller agencies should implement these incentives to help retain officers and compete with larger agencies. By providing the funding for these incentives, agencies and cities, can get a return on their investments that not only benefit their respective departments, but also their community. By placing trust and appreciation into their officers, the community receives a more educated and committed

police force. This should be the ultimate goal of any small department and community. Quality service to their citizens is the number one goal of any city government or police agency. Therefore, quality officers available to provide this service should be retained and sought after.

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