

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Citizen Police Academies
“Bridging the Gap”**

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies across the country are realizing that Citizen Police Academies (CPAs) are a valuable tool in the community policing concept of law enforcement. CPAs are used to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between police officers and citizens of the community. CPAs should be conducted to allow the citizens of the community to become more aware of how their police department operates, meet officers under more favorable conditions, and allow the graduates to form an alumni association to continue the positive relationship between the citizens and the officers. Written articles about CPAs and alumni associations concur that with the trust and cooperation gained between the citizens and police, the community as a whole benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies must realize the importance of the Citizens Police Academy (CPA) as a means to improving the relationship between citizens of the community and officers who are sworn to protect them. This applies to all law enforcement agencies, large and small, rural or urban. A CPA will allow citizens and officers the opportunity to meet and get to know one another under favorable conditions.

There are many misconceptions in the public as to what an officer actually does in the performance of their day in and day out duties. These misconceptions can breed mistrust and even hostility towards the officers, which ultimately leads the officers to develop an “Us versus Them” attitude. Citizens often do not understand officer duties, or they are oblivious to what police work actually involves. They only know what they have seen or heard, whether it was on the television, in the newspaper, in a movie, or simply as they were driving down the road. The vast majority of citizens in a community have very little contact with the police, and when they do have contact, it is usually under unfavorable or stressful conditions. These unfavorable encounters are usually when the citizen is a victim of a crime or is being pulled over for a traffic violation. If a citizen observes officers patrolling a “high crime” area, they may not see the officer’s presence as a means of reducing the crime in the area; it could be seen as the police “harassing” the people of the area. One of the main reasons why agencies should adopt a CPA is the attempt to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between the officers and citizens through education and fellowship. Pope, Jones, Cook, and Waltrip (2007) concluded: “For many police departments, the academies represent a way for local citizens to interact with law enforcement officials in a positive setting” (p. 46). This will

ultimately lead to building the trust needed between citizens and the officers. With trust evident between the community and the officers, the lines of communication will increase and, with that, the level of cooperation will increase between the community and the officers, which will ultimately help reduce crime in an area. Citizens will learn that by working together, anything is possible. Police agencies should conduct a Citizens Police Academy to allow citizens of the community to become more aware of how their police department operates, to allow citizens and officers to meet under favorable conditions, and to allow citizens to form an alumni association upon graduation to continue the positive relationship between the citizens and officers.

POSITION

Since the 1980s, police departments have been transitioning from the traditional style of policing to the community policing concept of police work. Law enforcement agencies have been looking at ways to get citizens of the community comfortable with cooperating with the police on day-to-day activities. One of the programs that came about was the Citizens Police Academy (CPA). Jordan (2000) summarized: "The development of the CPA paralleled the emergence of community policing" (p. 94). The CPAs were instituted by police departments to educate citizens in the way their local police department operated and why officers react the way they do in certain situations. Shafer and Bonello (2001) stated:

Curricula are intended to help participants understand the logic and rationale that motivate police behavior in common situations (e.g., an officer's concern for personal safety during a traffic stop). This insight is supposed to make citizens view officers' conduct as being driven by acceptable motives (e.g., officer safety considerations) rather than inappropriate biases (e.g., a citizen's race/ethnicity, gender, or age). p. 435

The CPA was also developed with the thought in mind that, on average, the citizens of the community have little contact with the police. The CPA allows citizens to have contact with police officers in a controlled environment that is more agreeable for classes to be taught in a calm atmosphere. With this, citizens become more comfortable being around police officers. And police officers will learn how to interact with citizens in a non-confrontational manner.

Most people would think that CPAs originated in the United States but this is not correct. The original idea for the CPAs began in 1977 in the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary in Great Britain, when the citizens wanted to know how their police functioned and operated. This became known as the “Night School” and was overwhelmingly popular from the start. In 1985, the idea of the CPA was introduced in Orlando, Florida, and the first Citizens Police Academy was born in the United States. Shortly afterwards, the idea spread to the Missouri City Police Department and now CPAs are all over the nation (“History of the Citizens Police Academy,” 2009).

CPAs were developed to enhance the relationship between the police and the citizens of the community. They were designed to educate the citizens through lectures, hands-on instruction, and the availability of ride-alongs with officers while they attended the academy. Cohn (1996) summarized: “Common topics include an overview of departmental organization, police selection and training, patrol procedures, law, vice and narcotics, domestic violence, police use of force, field operations, traffic stops, police stress, and crime prevention” (p. 267).

When a police department wants to start a CPA, they must set the academy up with the resources available. The sponsoring agency will want to keep the class small,

with a maximum of 25 students or less. By keeping the class small, it will give the instructors more one on one time with the citizens. This will ultimately build trust between the citizens and the instructors. Overall, citizens will probably have had very little contact with the police prior to the academy, and there will be some hesitancy on the citizens' part to open up with the officer. Once the citizens overcome their apprehension and realize the instructors are not the enemy, they will begin to be more receptive to what they are taught. Shafer & Bonello (2001) stated: "By going beyond stereotypes and assumptions, students will begin seeing officers as individuals rather than as members of an anonymous entity" (p. 436). With this training, the citizens will begin to realize that police work is not just about traffic stops and car chases. They will also realize that the police cannot solve a major crime in one hour like they see on television.

When the citizens realize what real police work is like, they will have a better understanding of the reasons an officer reacts in certain situations and the citizen will be able to express the reasoning to another citizen who does not fully understand the procedures of the police department. Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders (2005) wrote that while studying CPA classes in Richmond and Harrisonburg, Virginia, approximately 43% of the students advised that since the start of the CPA, they began explaining to family and friends what they had learned during the CPA. The opening of communication between the police and the citizens will be achieved, and this will be a major bridge built in which to build trust and confidence between citizens and police.

Once the CPA is established and citizens become more comfortable with being around police officers and citizens begin trusting the police more, the instructors can

stress the importance of cooperation between the citizens and the police department. It will also be highly stressed in training that cooperation must extend outside the training room and into the community. Citizens will learn about the community policing concept and that unless citizens and police learn to work together, crime in the community will remain unchecked. Cohn (1996) emphasized: "It is clear that policing today requires active citizen participation and involvement. The development of the CPA program is one way to encourage this cooperation" (p. 271). Through cooperating with the police and taking an active role in watching their neighborhoods, citizens will benefit when the crime rate goes down in their neighborhood. From the CPA, citizens will learn that by working together their community as a whole can benefit in a positive way. With information obtained from officers and by understanding police procedures, citizens will be able to educate their family, friends, and neighbors. They will become an important ally in the fight against crime. Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders (2005) asserted that:

Most would agree that the more citizens who respect and approve of police activities, the easier law enforcement's task will be. In addition, the more citizens who are willing to actively cooperate with police, the greater the likelihood that joint police and community goals can be accomplished. (p. 32).

Once the CPA class graduates, the police department administration may want to allow former students to form a Citizens Police Academy Alumni Association (CPAAA). This will allow citizens of the CPAAA to continue their learning process of the goals of the police department. The CPAAAs will also give the police department a volunteer base to use in events such as parades and festivals, where the police department may need help with crowd control, manning a booth, or doing a fundraiser for the police department. The CPAAA can also help recruit for future CPAs. The alumni will also get the feeling that they are doing something positive for the police

department and the community as a whole. The benefits of citizen police academy alumni associations (CPAAAs) are far-reaching. Not only can they be strong allies during difficult times, such as encounters between the community and police that are perceived negatively and lean budget years, but they are also a fantastic volunteer base (Barlow, Branch, & Close, 2009). And the alumni will get the sense that they are helping “their” police department by assisting the department in any way they can.

COUNTER POSITION

There may be the misconception that when the citizen graduates from the CPA that the citizen will become a “quasi” or so-called police officer. This may be a concern brought up by the police department administration and may be an obstacle in forming a CPA to begin with. Or the misconception may be with the citizens who want to join the CPA. It will be thoroughly explained to the administration prior to forming a CPA and to the citizen in the process prior to being accepted to the CPA that this is not the goal of the CPA. Citizens and the administration will understand that the purpose of the CPA is to educate the public in police matters to build understanding and cooperation between the two and not to have the citizens become police and do those jobs. Also, the citizens will be able to acknowledge that the police department is looking for an alliance with the community. This will help the officers do the job they were trained to do more effectively, which is to protect the citizens of their community. The Gilroy Police Department Citizen Academy Coordinator stated that the Citizens Police Academy “is not about molding civilians into “quasi-cops,”... it’s mostly about explaining to people how and why city police officers do what they do” (as cited in “An Invitation,” 2003, para. 2).

Another misconception may be that if the police department starts a CPA then the criminals will be able to attend the training and learn about police training and procedures and use that knowledge against the police. For reasons of reputation and image, a police agency does not want criminal offenders or individuals who have questionable backgrounds in their CPA. Further, since they are providing pertinent police information to citizens, they do not want to instruct potential or convicted offenders on police procedures and practices (Palmiotto & Unninthan, 2002). To ensure this, there will be a screening process in which the citizens fill out an application. From this, the citizen will have a background check and an interview completed prior to being selected to attend the CPA. This process should screen out anyone with an unsavory background. Bumphus, Gaines, & Blakely (1999) found in their studies that the most common selection criterion is the criminal background check. Approximately one quarter of the agencies in the study required this criminal records check prior to acceptance into the CPA. Some agencies questioned stated they excluded anyone with a felony record, and a couple of agencies required a clean record.

CONCLUSION

As community policing continues to evolve, it is becoming more apparent that for police officers to effectively do their jobs, they need the support and cooperation of community members. This can be achieved by incorporating the CPA into the law enforcement agencies' various tools to educate the citizens of their community. This will instill understanding of the police officer's job, and it will build the trust between the citizens and the police. With this trust, there will be better communication between the two and better cooperation from the citizens in helping solve crimes in the community as

a whole. Bohannon (2004) indicated: "Programs of this type can be used to build a partnership with a better educated public" (p. 2).

CPAs also allow citizens to meet officers under favorable conditions, which ultimately leads to citizens coming to the realization that officers are actually people who have the same problems and concerns that any other person may have. It also allows officers a chance to learn exactly how citizens in the community view their department as a whole. It is generally a learning experience for both the officers and the citizens. Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders (2005) reported: "Published descriptions of CPAs are typically quite positive, and suggest that the CPA has been a valuable experience for both the citizen participants and the sponsoring police department" (p. 22). It is also beneficial to the department to allow the graduates of the CPA to form alumni associations to continue the partnership after the academy is over. The CPAAA has proven to be a good volunteer source for various law enforcement functions and also allows the citizens the opportunity to publically continue their support of their police department, especially in rough times.

While there are some cases of contention against CPA's, research allows those misconceptions to be addressed. The first counter position of citizens becoming "quasi" or so-called police officers can be addressed in the application phase. If a citizen wants to become a police officer, the citizen can be informed that the CPA is an educational tool used by the police to educate the community on how their department operates and how the police officers react to certain situations and why. The instructors will also stress throughout the CPA that the purpose is to have better educated citizens in the community, and officers do not want citizens to do officer duties because of the inherent

dangers of the job. The second counter position, allowing criminals to attend the academy where they will be able to learn the procedures, is not as much a concern of a concern as it used to be. The applicants in the majority of CPAs have to go through thorough background checks and interviews prior to being selected to attend the academy. This will stop the criminal element from even applying to attend in the first place.

The CPA can be a positive experience for all involved if it is properly set up and monitored for what works and what does not work. CPAs can be adjusted to fit all agencies, whether they are small, medium, or large. The sponsoring agency must be dedicated to educating the citizens of the community and provide a friendly learning atmosphere in which to meet. Aryani, Garrett, and Alsabrook (2000) summarized: "Success of the CPA depends on the administrative support, the strength of the curriculum and staff members, and the selection of students" (p. 17). In further support, Cohn (1996) stated: "Overall it appears that the rewards of a CPA far outweigh the potential disadvantages. Although not every department will want to organize a CPA, the program does appear to help improve relationships between police and the citizens they serve" (p.271). The main goals of the CPA are to educate the public, open lines of communication, and gain the trust and cooperation of citizens of the community to combat crime in the community. This is where "Together, We Can" is placed in the citizen's mind and heart.

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