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Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) Personnel Selection

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ABSTRACT

This research paper addresses establishing an effective and efficient process for the selection of correctional officers for a special emergency response team (SERT) for the Comal County Jail. The information obtained during this research will aid in the development of setting strict standards and requirements for corrections officers who will be selected to perform this most critical role in the detention facility. Research was conducted by reviewing literature from past and current corrections journals, internet web sites, and mailing surveys to other county jails throughout the state of Texas in order to gain a broad range of selection methods used for personnel selection.

Today's corrections officers who respond to disturbances within the confines of a detention facility will need to have the ability to deal with highly stressful and emotional situations. When the inmate population in a jail increases so does the number of disturbances and the potential for a riot or organized escape to occur.

The conclusion of this research project shows that jail facilities can benefit from having an organized and highly trained group of officers to respond to disturbances in their facility. Due to the size of some county jails that having an established team of individuals to respond to disturbances on each shift is not feasible. Research however, has indicated that even though a facility may not have the adequate manpower to have a full-time response team on every shift, it is highly recommended that administrators provided tactical response training to all of their personnel. Research has shown that providing tactical response training to each officer reduces liabilities for injury to staff and inmates.

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INTRODUCTION

The Comal County Sheriff's Office currently has a Special Weapons And Tactics Team (SWAT) and a Crisis Negotiation Team to respond to emergencies within its geographical area. It does not, however, have a specialized team of corrections officers to respond to emergencies such as, riots, inmate disturbances, or organized escape attempts within and around the Comal County Jail. The Comal County Jail not only houses individuals arrested by local agencies, but has contracts with the Department of Homeland Security (formerly known as the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service), and the United States Marshal's Service to house individuals detained by their respective agencies.

Although the Comal County Sheriff's Office has developed a Special Weapons And Tactics Team and a Crisis Negotiations Team, the Comal County Sheriff's Office Jail Administration asked one question. "If there was a major disturbance or critical incident within the jail or an assault against the jail to free a suspected terrorist, would we be able to respond quickly and effectively to overcome it?" The answer was "no". The command staff from both the jail and patrol met together and determined that the Comal County Sheriff's Office needed to develop a Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) in the Corrections Division to respond to these emergencies, and work with the SWAT and Crisis Negotiation Teams.

Due to the terrorist attack that occurred on September 11, 2001 in New York City there has been an increase of suspects being arrested or detained by these agencies as well as other federal agencies for involvement in or suspected

involvement in domestic or foreign terrorism. With this increase, these agencies need to place those suspected of terrorist activity in local county detention centers.

The goal of the research is to ascertain the most effective method to select competent Corrections Division personnel to carry out this stressful and specialized duty. Research will concentrate on answering the question: What special training and qualities do such personnel need to possess to be selected for the Special Emergency Response Team? Developing a Special Emergency Response Team will require stringent procedures in selection of personnel for critical positions that involve a high level of stressful decision-making determinations.

The research will involve a survey of several county jails ranging from midsize to large. Review of literature from correctional journals, magazines, newsletters, as well as policies and procedures from other counties and states will be conducted. This will help to gain a broader base of different selection procedures used to select personnel for different types of specialized response teams. The intended outcome of this research will show that the Comal County Sheriff's Office needs a SERT team and that there is a need to develop standardized policies and procedures for a SERT member selection process.

With the never-ending liability issues facing correctional administrators it is becoming more difficult to select dependable and reliable people for specialized tactical positions. By conducting extensive research it is anticipated to show that, a foundation can be developed to select qualified corrections officers for this stressful duty. This in turn should assist in reducing the liability issues associated

with selecting personnel for specialized response teams. It will also increase the potential success of operations while minimizing injury to staff, civilians, and inmates.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two county jails that have a full-time type of team to respond to emergencies or disturbances in their facilities have been used as a guide for this research. These jails range from 230 beds to 900 beds. The Harris County Jail and McLennan County Jail were surveyed along with eleven others in Texas, and personnel selection guidelines were compared. A discovery was made that not all agencies surveyed called their emergency response teams a Special Emergency Response Team (SERT). Agencies contacted had varying names for their teams such as Emergency Response Team (ERT), Special Detail Team (SDT.), Special Response Team (SRT), and the Selective Investigation Response Team (SIRT). Articles, which were reviewed in corrections journals, called some of these teams a Correctional Emergency Response Team (CERT). The comparisons made from these agencies will be used as data to help develop guidelines for establishing the criteria to select personnel for a Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) at the Comal County Jail.

Today's average county jail does not have an organized group of officers, who are specially trained to handle barricaded inmates, perform cell extractions, respond to riots, or perform hostage rescues in the confines of a detention facility. Most small and midsize jails rely on corrections officers who have not been specially trained in responding to disturbances and performing cell extractions.

Lt. Danny Downes of the McLennan County Jail (Personal communication, April 8, 2002), stated that since the development of a Special Detail Team they have had fewer injuries to inmates and corrections staff during disturbances and cell extractions. Lt. Downes further added that instead of officers just rushing into situations as they did before the development of their team, they now move slower, which gives them time to properly react to the situation, decreasing the likelihood of unnecessary use of force or injury to corrections staff or inmates.

County Jail Administrators have become more aware that there is an increasing need to develop Special Emergency Response Teams to respond to emergencies within their facilities. Administrators also understand these teams need to be highly trained. This enables them to handle a variety of different and volatile situations that could arise in a detention facility.

The training of corrections personnel to perform specialized tactical response duties in detention facilities is becoming more of an accepted concept within the corrections field. The use of tactical response teams in larger detention facilities has become more common in today's detention facilities out of necessity for the safety of staff and prisoners. Smaller facilities however, with a small number of corrections officers on staff compared to larger facilities have questioned whether or not it is practical for them to establish a full time team due to training and equipment cost. Detention facilities that do not have a specialized response team could rely on law enforcement SWAT response team to handle disturbances in their facilities, but this may not be the solution. The use of a SWAT team may not be practical for responses to small every day disturbances, since law enforcement SWAT teams are accustomed to dealing with incidents

that are significantly different. Due to the different roles CERT and SWAT need to use different tactics and different weaponry; not knowing that can cause catastrophic outcomes (Nowicki, 2002).

With this in mind it has been suggested that each facility develop an exceptionally trained team of individuals to respond to incidents unique only to detention. Notwithstanding the size and composition, SERTs, with their specialized training, can quickly and efficiently contain, neutralize, and return order. Even though a SWAT team could be used to resolve prison violence as it was done during a prison riot at the Attica prison in 1971, employing tactics and techniques, which are appropriate for situations outside a detention facility, will do it. Today's SWAT teams are tactically trained for urban and rural based missions while correctional teams are trained for dealing with the confines of their facilities and property surrounding their facilities (Topham, 2003). Garcia stated that correctional SERT team personnel know the facility in which they work and are specifically trained for those situations far better than any local SWAT team. Research indicates that SERT members need to be role models of on-the-job performance in order to set the example to their peers to follow (2003). Garcia indicated that an agency's philosophy regarding how inmates are treated during a situation inside your facility and the way your team responds to resolve the situation will set the tone for future relations with the inmate population (1998).

Chief Deputy Joe Norwick, of the Dane County Sheriff's Office in Madison, WI, stated that correctional officers need to have good interpersonal communications skills in order to talk to people, and that being a good listener is also a valuable trait for officers to possess. Many corrections administrators

believe that corrections officers must have some basic common sense or at least good judgment. Administrators are also beginning to realize that today's corrections officer need to have the ability to relate to other human beings and be able to recognize and understand their values and needs. Literature has suggested that officers should receive diversity training to assist them in relating to various cultures which can help resolve. Having proficient counseling skills can aid corrections officers to do the job more effectively and help the inmate. It has been suggested that just taking time to listen with a nod of the head can be invaluable (Norwick, as cited in Nowicki, 2002).

Today's correction officer is faced with newer challenges when dealing with inmates with regard to use of force issues compared to years past. Mark Fitzgibbons, Director of the Beaufort County, SC, Detention Center indicated that, successful correctional officers need to accept and learn new technology. The days of an officer being able to just walk around the facility with a wad of keys and tossing food through a bean port to an inmate have ended (Fitzgibbons, as cited in Nowicki, 2002).

Agencies such as the Prince George's County Department of Corrections require their officers receive 40 hours of ERT Basic Training. Candidates receive their training from senior ERT members, who are sergeants. Some of the training includes defensive counterstrikes, pressure point control tactics, major disturbance and response control, cell extractions, handgun retention and disarming techniques. Basic training also involves crowd control formations, speed cuffing and handcuffing techniques and spontaneous knife defense training (Collins, 2002).

A review of literature involving SWAT and Hostage Negotiations personnel selection process was conducted to see if the selection criterion was similar to that of correctional response teams. These documents indicate that although SWAT Teams and Crisis Negotiations Teams fall into a different realm outside the correctional environment, the personnel selection process has similar requirements as found in corrections journals and surveys returned from county jails that have Special Emergency Response Teams. The data reviewed will be used as a guide to enhance the selection process for the Comal County Jail (Koepp, 2000).

Research indicated that before administrators establish a Special Response Team they need to identify the purpose of their teams and specific skills and behavioral attributes required to perform duties as a team member. Administrators and supervisors must develop and administer an applicable and dependable mechanism that will recognize the personnel who possess these desired characteristics. Team members should be selected from experienced officers who have shown an interest in the team and are able to meet predetermined standards (Lucas 1992, as cited by Ross, 1996, p. 13).

Various assignment studies have discovered that emotional stability, a non-argumentative personality, and a higher than average intellectual aptitude, and the ability to properly cope with stress are some desired characteristics in tactical officers (Lucas, Kolman, Adams et al., and Scrivner, as cited by Ross, 1996). Karlsson (2001) indicated in his article that every potential team member should go through a complete physical assessment. Tactical need to be

recommended by a superior officer in order to be considered for a SERT position and should have no disciplinary actions against them in their personnel record.

Methodology

What is the best method for recruiting and selecting SERT team members for the Comal County Sheriff's Office? It is believed research will show that the Comal County Sheriff's Office SERT team personnel selection process, should be to implement a selection procedure that would set requirements for time in service prerequisites, an oral interview process, and a review of the applicants initial employment psychological examination results. Research will also show that by establishing SERT team member selection requirements it will assist the Comal County Sheriff's Office in establishing a standardized process, which will help reduce civil liability for the agency when officers are placed in situations which require the use of multiple officers to respond to disturbances in the jail facility.

Is there a need for the Comal County Sheriff's Office Jail to develop and establish a special emergency response team to respond to disturbances or riots within the jail facility? In September of 2000 the Comal County Sheriff's Office completed the expansion of the Comal County Jail, which increased the number of bed space from 146 beds to 337 beds due to an increase in local crime and inter-local agreements to house federal detainees. Since that time due to the growth of the County and the increase of federal detainees the daily inmate population has increased substantially. During the years 2000 to 2002 the average daily inmate population was 260 inmates.

Currently the daily inmate population is averaging 296 inmates daily. If the current trend of growth in Comal County increases and the increase of federal prisoners continues, the Comal County Jail will again have to expand its bed space to handle future growth. With this growth we will also see a significant increase in disturbances or possible riots between inmates and staff. In order to prepare us to handle disturbances or riots on a larger scale, we must be proactive in dealing with the increases and find a more effective, organized, and efficient system to respond to these types of incidents.

After module one of Leadership Command College a questionnaire was sent out to 13 county jails classified as large capacity facilities. The jails represented were from all parts of Texas and was a satisfactory reference sample of different size jail facilities ranging from a capacity of 150 beds to 1000 beds or more. Only eight of the thirteen agencies surveyed responded (61.5 %). Upon return of the questionnaires another telephone survey was conducted of agencies that do have a team of officers who respond to emergencies and disturbances within their jail facility. Agencies that responded, but indicated that they did not have a response team were also contacted and interviewed to help determine why they did not have a team.

The data collected will be analyzed and put into different categories. The categories will be broken down into testing, physical agility, mental stability, interview boards, and in-service time requirements. The findings from this material will be listed so that recorded responses can be seen.

Findings

Eight of the thirteen county jails surveyed in Texas responded. The responses received from these agencies employ similar personnel selection guidelines as Harris and McLennan County. The most common comparisons between Harris County, McLennan County, and the six other agencies surveyed, show an individual applying for consideration to be a member of the Special Emergency Response Team must be a volunteer, off their probationary period, pass a written test, and appear before an oral interview board.

A follow up telephone survey was conducted with the eight agencies that responded to the survey. The new survey went into more detail and sought out personal characteristics that these agencies looked for. The results indicated agencies looked for Corrections Officers who did not have any discipline problems, have good interpersonal communications skills, good listening and interviewing skills, good report writing skills, a high level of patience, and common sense.

Research indicates that standards and guidelines for selecting personnel for special emergency response teams by Texas county jails and some out of state prisons and jails are fairly consistent. The research indicated that the selection criteria between large and small detention facilities were comparable. Today's county jail Corrections Officer is faced with the ever-increasing challenge of maintaining order and responding to major incidents in their facilities on a daily basis. One of the most critical and very important operations that a Special Emergency Response Team faces is a cell extraction. Comal County Sheriff Bob Holder (Personal communication January 2001) has referred to jails as a

“potential powder keg that is ready to explode at any moment”. With this in mind common sense tells us that it is extremely vital that officers who are called upon to execute this critical task be selected based upon a comprehensive and methodical selection process.

In both the initial questionnaire and follow-up telephone survey agencies were asked several specific questions:

- Does your agency have an established team of individuals to respond to disturbances or riots in the jail facility?
- Years of experience to be selected for team?
- Physical fitness test required? If yes what type of testing is conducted?
- Written test required?
- Psychological fitness examination?
- Oral interview board?

When the initial questionnaire and subsequent telephone surveys had been finished the results showed that there was not a consistent process to select personnel between the midsize jails. The larger size jails however were found to have a more consistent selection process with fewer variations.

Surveys found correctional agencies with an established team required that a corrections officer be off their initial employment probation period. They also found that agencies having an established team provided SERT training to all of its officers. Probation periods ranged from 6 months to 18 months. Follow-up telephone surveys of jails regarding minimum employment requirements for team member selection indicate that on average most agencies have a 6 month probation period before a person can be eligible to apply for a position on the

team. Law enforcement SWAT and Negotiations teams however, on the average required an officer to have two years of law enforcement experience. The reason for the disparity between the probation periods of jail and law enforcement response teams is due to the high turnover rate of officers within the corrections field compared to law enforcement peace officers.

The majority of correctional facilities do not require a specified written test for selection on their tactical teams. Most agencies use the initial employment test when considering eligibility for correctional tactical teams. Other agencies, which had an established full-time tactical team, indicated that their testing process was based on the applicant's ability to successfully pass the basic SORT training course.

When researching requirements concerning advanced psychological testing of correctional tactical teams, it was found that there was no requirement for officers to be evaluated. Every agency surveyed indicated that they reviewed the applicant's initial employment psychological examination. They used the results of the initial psychological examination to make their determination as to whether or not the applicant could be considered a suitable prospect.

Most agencies who did not have a full-time team, but had personnel trained in tactical operations did not consider the testing of an individual's physical fitness a major concern in the selection process. These agencies used the lowest range of testing such as push-ups and sit-ups only to evaluate their candidates. Other agencies surveyed had no requirements at all. Midsize agencies that had established full-time teams placed a great deal of emphasis on the physical condition of their candidates. These agencies required their

applicants to pass an agility test consisting of push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, passing a run between one and a half miles to two miles, as well as passing an obstacle course.

When it came to the use of an oral interview board, each agency surveyed that had an established tactical team made use of an oral interview board in the selection process. These agencies indicated that the use of an oral interview board aided in the selection process. Agencies surveyed felt that by using an oral interview board they were able to gain a better understanding of the applicants train of thought concerning use of force options and their decision making ability under stressful conditions.

Literature concerning the selection process of tactical team members failed to indicate any specifics on a standardized selection process. The literature found mainly focused on the characteristics jail administrators should look for in prospective team members. Tactical team members should possess good judgment, common sense, have good communications skills, and a high level of patience. Literature focused mainly on the need for training of tactical teams and the liabilities associated with not training personnel in responding to and dealing with disturbances in correctional facilities.

Discussions/Conclusions

What is the best method for recruiting and selecting SERT team members for the Comal County Sheriff's Office? It is believed research will show that the Comal County Sheriff's Office SERT team personnel selection process would be to implement a selection process that would set requirements for time in service prerequisites, an oral interview process, and a review of the applicants initial

employment psychological examination results. Research will also show that by establishing SERT team member selection requirements it will assist the Comal County Sheriff's Office in establishing a standardized process, which will help reduce civil liability for the agency when officers are placed in situations which require the use of multiple officers to respond to disturbances in the jail facility.

The Comal County Jail does not have a specially trained tactical team to respond to disturbances, riots, or organized escape attempts in its facility. Currently if the Comal County Jail were to experience a major situation in the facility, its personnel would not be able to respond quickly and effectively to overcome it. The purpose of this research was to ascertain the most effective approach and process for the selection of personnel when developing and establishing a special emergency response team in a correctional facility.

From correctional literature, data reviewed from correctional agencies, as well as law enforcement literature found that there are three main principles in the selection criteria of correctional response team members. Tactical members need to be volunteers, go through an interview process, and attend a 40-hour basic correctional SERT training course. Most correctional facilities used these three selection requirements at a minimum whether they had a full-time team or an established team of individuals who respond only during the most serious of incidents.

During the research of this topic a discovery was made; the majority of county jails in the State of Texas do not have an organized or established team of individuals to respond to disturbances in their facilities. Agencies that did have a tactical team were hesitant to provide information regarding their teams policies

and procedures. This could be partly due to liability issue concerns of most correctional facilities regarding the disclosure of their specific policies and procedures to others. Debra Barry, (personal communication April 8, 2003) Chief Jail Administrator Guadalupe County Jail, stated that she does have a specialized tactical team for her facility, but that is not what it should be due to limited personnel to staff a team on each shift. Barry did indicate however, that she felt an agency would benefit from having a team.

During the course of this research the Comal County Jail administration has determined that there is a need to develop a specialized team of individuals to respond to major incidents within the facility. Correctional facilities today are facing an ever-increasing liability concerning the use of force applied during incidents within the facility. Although jails may have established policies and procedures to assist them in responding to litigation regarding use of force complaints they must ensure that these policies address a standardized selection process.

By using the information found during this research the Comal County Jail will be able to institute a standardized personnel selection process, which will be efficient and effective in developing its Special Emergency Response Team. This will not only help decrease the liabilities associated with use of force issues, but ensure that only the most qualified officers are selected to perform the critical tasks of responding incidents in a detention facility.

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