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**S.W.A.T.: The Need for Standardization**

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## **ABSTRACT**

An important evolution in law enforcement is the creation of S.W.A.T. teams. In order to create and properly utilize a S.W.A.T. team, law enforcement agencies must take vital steps to reduce liability and increase team effectiveness. These necessary steps relate to the creation of formal guidelines, the establishment of a formal selection process, providing necessary training, and the proper utilization of S.W.A.T. teams by various law enforcement agencies. Without taking these necessary steps, law enforcement agencies are improperly developing S.W.A.T. teams, distorting the reason for which S.W.A.T. teams were created, and increasing the liability to officers and police departments. The purpose of this research project is to demonstrate to law enforcement agencies that the development and utilization of a S.W.A.T. team is critical. This research project will examine existing literature and survey various law enforcement agencies about their tactical teams. In addition, law enforcement agencies and lawmakers must determine if there is a need for standardization in the selection and training of S.W.A.T. teams. By examining this issue law enforcement agencies will review their practices and understand that negative incidents have the potential to adversely affect the entire law enforcement community. Research has concluded that the majority of law enforcement agencies have put in place the necessary requirements for forming a professional S.W.A.T. team. However, not all law enforcement agencies have taken the necessary steps for proper utilizing a tactical team. Therefore the need for standardization has become a necessity.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the evolving system of criminal activities and criminal violence throughout the United States, police departments have accepted and sanctioned the development and use of Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) teams. S.W.A.T. teams were created to deal with special or unusual situations that rise above the level of training and abilities of other police personnel. If proper standards, regulations and guidelines are put in place and observed by various police departments the availability of a S.W.A.T. team can be beneficial and productive. Because of these guidelines police departments will be able to properly regulate the selection of S.W.A.T. team members, training of S.W.A.T. team members, and use of the S.W.A.T. team. However, if police departments do not take the necessary steps, the potential to misuse police personnel and distort the intended purpose of S.W.A.T. teams can expose police departments to liability and the law enforcement community to increased regulation and guidelines.

In recent years various regulations have begun to evolve that caution and regulate the conduct of police departments and S.W.A.T. teams. These various guidelines relate to the deployment of S.W.A.T. teams, the use of Diversionary Devices (D.D's), and the exhibition of force in relation to the degree of the offense committed. These decisions and regulations have been brought about by misuse or mistakes made by police departments and their S.W.A.T. teams.

The purpose of this research project is to examine whether various police departments have taken the necessary steps to guarantee that S.W.A.T. teams are professionally formed and maintained. When a law enforcement agency makes the decision to implement a S.W.A.T. team it must be committed to creating a professional unit. The proper implementation of a tactical unit will be enhanced through the proper selection, training and utilization of personnel. It is

hypothesized that the acceptance and availability of S.W.A.T. teams has led to a need for standard guidelines to govern the formation and use of S.W.A.T. teams.

This research project will address various aspects of the formation and utilization of S.W.A.T. teams. First, this research project will determine if police departments have put in place necessary guidelines or policies that will help determine minimum standards for the selection of S.W.A.T. officers. Second, this research project will determine if police departments are providing S.W.A.T. teams with adequate types of training and allowing for a sufficient amount of training time for personnel. Third, this research project will determine whether police departments have put in place guidelines or policies that regulate the criteria for the use of S.W.A.T. teams. Finally, this research project will determine if police departments are improperly utilizing S.W.A.T. teams for assignments or jobs that should be carried out by other units or officers. This research project will look at these different factors by examining existing literature and research, and surveying select law enforcement agencies in reference to the procedures and activities of various S.W.A.T. teams.

In a society of more complex criminal activity the question to be answered is not whether S.W.A.T. teams are necessary, but whether law enforcement agencies have put in place the pieces necessary to have a successful team. It is likely that the information gained in this research project will reveal a wide range of differences that have resulted in various problems associated with the formation and utilization of S.W.A.T. teams. There are a number of professional agencies that have put in place the necessary guidelines to maintain and train a professional S.W.A.T. team, however, many police agencies have done just the opposite. The most common problems associated with the misapplication of S.W.A.T. teams will be a lack of

formal guidelines, a lack of proper selection procedures, a lack of proper training, and improperly utilizing these units in a manner other than what they were initially intended.

There are various implications that may come about because of the results or findings of this research project. Law enforcement agencies may determine that they are not taking the necessary steps to maintain a S.W.A.T. team and remedy the situation. On the other hand, law enforcement agencies may determine that the costs and liabilities of maintaining and using a S.W.A.T. team are too great and decide to bypass this resource. In conclusion, Law enforcement agencies must and should realize that additional powers or authority brings additional responsibilities.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

With an increase in the scale and violence of criminals in the 1960s and 1970s, law enforcement agencies have been forced to adapt and create new resources to deal with these types of criminal actions. The various criminal activities and increased show of violence by criminals associated with the formation of early Special Weapons and Tactics include the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, California and the 1966 clock tower shootings at the University of Texas (Mijares, McCarthy & Perkins, 2000). Because of criminal incidents like these, police departments were forced to recognize the inability of basic patrol officers to quickly and effectively deal with these types of special incidents. Based on the existence of these special incidents law enforcement agencies “pointed to a need for law enforcement specialists who are trained to plan for and deal with unusual events as a coordinated unit without depleting the law enforcement agency’s personnel or ability to deal with routine calls for police service” (Mijares et al., 2000, p. 14). According to a survey published in a 1999 publication by the C.A.T.O. Institute, 90% of police departments in cities with a population of more than 50,000 had

S.W.A.T. teams and 70% of police departments in cities with a population of less than 50,000 had S.W.A.T. teams (Weber, 1999).

In order to create and properly utilize a S.W.A.T. team, law enforcement agencies must take vital steps to reduce liability and increase team effectiveness. These steps include a proper selection process to choose qualified candidates, proper training to provide officers with the necessary skills, and a set of guidelines or policies (general orders) that list duties and regulate the use of S.W.A.T. teams. Without taking these necessary steps, law enforcement agencies are improperly developing S.W.A.T. teams, distorting the reason for which S.W.A.T. teams were created, and increasing the liability to officers and police departments. The Board of Directors of the National Tactical Officers Association (N.T.O.A.) defined a Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) team as:

“A team of professional, highly trained, skilled and motivated law enforcement officers who have been specially selected, trained and equipped to respond to and resolve hostage incidents, barricaded gunman incidents, sniper situations, high risk apprehensions, high risk warrant service, personal protection and other special assignments which are beyond the capability of other police personnel” (National Tactical Officers Association Board of Directors, 2002, p. 6).

Critical incidents in recent years have led to police departments and other agencies to look at how S.W.A.T. teams are being created and utilized. An example of a critical incident would be the accidental shooting of an eleven year old. On September 13, 2000, Alberto Sepulveda, eleven years of age, was shot and killed in his home during the execution of a narcotics search warrant (Farnsworth, 2000). As a result of this shooting Attorney General Bill Lockyer appointed a commission to examine the use of S.W.A.T. teams and to make recommendations to improve the safety to officers and citizens.

On September 10, 2002 the California Attorney General's Commission on Special Weapons and Tactics issued its final report. The report identified several issues to consider and

made recommendations to improve the utilization of S.W.A.T. teams. First, the commission determined that there was no clear definition of what constitutes a S.W.A.T. team and proposed a definition (Office of the Attorney General: California Department of Justice [O.A.G], 2002).

The commission defined a S.W.A.T. team as:

“A S.W.A.T. team is a designated unit of law enforcement officers that is specially trained and equipped to work as a coordinated team to respond to critical incidents including, but not limited to, hostage taking, barricaded suspects, snipers, terrorist acts and other high-risk incidents. As a matter of agency policy, such a unit may be used to serve high-risk warrants, both search and arrest, where public safety issues compel the use of such a unit (O.A.G., 2002, p. 5).”

Second, the commission determined that there were no set standards for S.W.A.T. teams. The commission recommended the establishment of different levels of S.W.A.T. teams based on their capabilities or skill levels (O.A.G., 2002). Third, the commission recognized that there were not mandated training standards for S.W.A.T. teams (O.A.G., 2002). The commission suggested that S.W.A.T. training be developed, that new officers be required to complete a basic and advance S.W.A.T. training, continuous in-service training, and an annual assessment of various teams (O.A.G., 2002). Fourth, the commission determined that there are a wide variety of tactical applications within police agencies throughout the state (O.A.G., 2002). The commission recommended that agencies develop operational procedures based on the level of operational skills, emphasizing practices that reduce risks (O.A.G., 2002). It is important for law enforcement agencies to recognize that the number one reason for developing a tactical team is to reduce risks to citizens, police officers, and suspects. Fifth, the commission determined that there were a wide variety of S.W.A.T. models throughout the state (O.A.G., 2002). The commission recommended that police agencies should analyze their capabilities based on the recommended skill levels, and develop a policy for responding to different situations (O.A.G., 2002). Sixth, the commission determined that there was a lack of written guidelines regarding



uniforms, equipment and team-member identification (O.A.G., 2002). The lack of formal policies or regulations governing tactical teams will increase the level of misapplication by law enforcement agencies. The commission recommended that each agency should establish guidelines regarding the utilization of S.W.A.T. equipment (O.A.G., 2002). The commission also recommended that absent of extenuating circumstances, team members should be clearly identifiable as law enforcement personnel (O.A.G., 2002). Seventh, the commission determined that there is a lack of clarity among the public as to the exact mission of S.W.A.T. (O.A.G., 2002). The commission recommended that each agency should engage in a public education program about their S.W.A.T. team and advised that the public education program should be to educate the public that the primary mission of S.W.A.T. teams is the preservation of life (O.A.G., 2002). These programs will enable citizens to gain a better understanding of the purpose of tactical units and provide a clear understanding of the methods that are employed. Finally, in the conclusion of the report the commission advised that the clearest issue identified was the need for a set of standards in all aspects of S.W.A.T. operations and advised that a lack of clear standards in training, tactics, and police can and must be addressed (O.A.G., 2002).

The first step in developing a S.W.A.T. team is to develop necessary guidelines and policies that regulate the implementation and utilization of these teams. Police departments should formalize the entire process concerning S.W.A.T. teams into a policy and procedure that is clear and understandable. In 2001, the N.T.O.A. published a special feature that detailed the development of a S.W.A.T. policy. In the article the N.T.O.A. listed numerous items that should be contained within the policy. The items include:

1. A written mission statement describing the purpose of the team.
2. A written description of the composition and make up of the team.
3. A clear chain of command structure that details the lines of communication and notification.

4. A written process for activation of the team.
5. A written description of the of the selection process that includes the types of activities to be performed.
6. A written standard determining the minimum amount of training.
7. A written standard detailing the use of safety equipment and weapons.
8. A written standard detailing the activation and utilization of the team.
9. A formal process for documenting team use in after action report  
(National Tactical Officers Association [N.T.O.A.], 2001, p.8).

The second step in developing a S.W.A.T. team is to establish criteria for the selection of qualified applicants and team members. The Tyler Police Department has developed standards that are utilized to select qualified officers. These standards include a minimum level of physical fitness and abilities, a firearms qualification, an interview board, a medical examination, and a psychological evaluation. Without successful completion of all of the areas, officers are not allowed to join the S.W.A.T. team. Police departments should look to examine candidates based on a number of categories that include cognitive skills, physical ability, and proficiency skills of individuals (Carmona, 2001). The proper selection of candidates will ensure that officers who are put into tactical situations have the ability to perform the strenuous duties and make the necessary critical decisions when needed. These standards should be developed to guarantee that they could be reproduced and administered so as to be unbiased and guarantee the integrity of the selection process (Carmona, 2001). The established guidelines should not be waived or changed to accommodate a particular candidate. The implementation of a formal selection process will provide a level of legitimacy to S.W.A.T. teams and will put up barriers for the addition of unqualified candidates to tactical teams.

In addition, police departments must provide S.W.A.T. teams with the time to train and resources to receive effective training. The Tyler Police Department currently provides two days (16 hours) per month to conduct training. In addition, the Tyler Police Department provides team members with training that includes annual participation in the T.T.P.O.A conference,

firearms training and certification (quarterly), use of defensive tactics, certification in the use of less lethal munitions and chemical munitions, performing high risk warrants (Close Quarter Battle / C.Q.B.), responding to active shooters, physical fitness, and instructional lectures. S.W.A.T. teams can be arranged to operate on a full or part time basis depending on departmental size and need. S.W.A.T. teams can also be set up within a department or through a multi-agency agreement. The N.T.O.A. recommends that a part-time team should train a minimum of two days each month and full-time teams should train for twenty-five percent of on-duty time (N.T.O.A., 2001). The time given to tactical teams to train greatly enhances the physical skills and decision-making skills during crisis situations. In a 2000 meeting the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education received a request from T.T.P.O.A. asking for the creation of a proficiency certification for S.W.A.T. officers (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education [T.C.L.E.O.S.E.], 2000). Along with other areas of law enforcement this requirement would set a level of standards necessary to attain state certification.

Also, police departments must make rational and educated choices on when to properly utilize a S.W.A.T. team. Without the proper deployment of tactical teams a negative perception of the role of law enforcement will quickly develop. Based on the definitions by the T.T.P.O.A. and the California Attorney General's Commission on Special Weapons and Tactics the proper factor for determining the use of a S.W.A.T. team would be determined by the ability of patrol officers. An example of utilizing a S.W.A.T. team for activities outside of the intended use can clearly be seen at the Fresno Police Department in Fresno, California. Members of the Fresno P.D. S.W.A.T. team were equipped and placed on the street to deal with increasing problems

with drug activity, gangs and crime (Weber, 1999). These tactical officers were placed into a position of performing basic patrol duties in order to send a message of no tolerance.

In order for the law enforcement community to be considered a professional institution it is necessary to portray a level of professionalism. This can be accomplished by ensuring that officers are given the proper training and that officers are utilized in proper settings. In a Spring 2002 article of *The Tactical Edge*, authors Jim Clark and Scott B. Wood discuss the proper utilization of S.W.A.T. teams and evolving legal trends. The article analyzed tactics utilized by members of a S.W.A.T. team when executing a misdemeanor search warrant. Officers were directed by the sheriff to serve a search warrant and nothing in the suspect's past indicated that there was a threat to law enforcement, the suspect did not have a criminal history, and there was no information that would lead officers to believe that the suspect would resist officers. Clark and Wood indicated that the court found that utilizing S.W.A.T. teams for misdemeanor warrants is not automatically an excessive use of force, because of a number of factors that can be associated with the decision (Clark & Wood, p. 68). In the conclusion of the article, Clark and Wood indicate "the courts make it clear there must be appropriate justification in deploying a S.W.A.T. team, especially in situations that are not common for S.W.A.T., for example, the service of a misdemeanor arrest warrant" (Clark & Wood, 2002, p. 70).

## **METHODOLOGY**

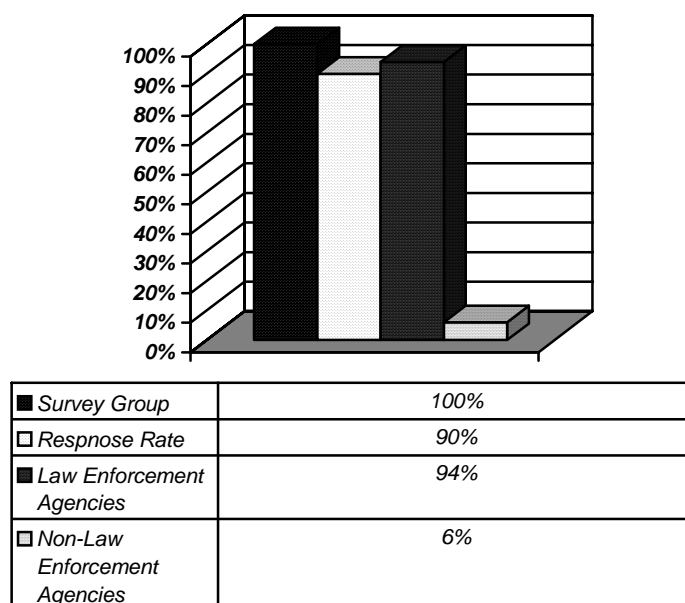
With the advancing levels of criminal activity, law enforcement agencies have been forced to create new units or adopt practices that address these evolving situations. The most visible evolution in law enforcement is the creation of tactical S.W.A.T. teams. This evolution has made it necessary to look at the various steps that are necessary to form a professional and effective unit.

Is there a need for standardization that regulates whether police departments have taken the necessary steps to guarantee that S.W.A.T. teams are professionally formed or maintained. This research project has looked at the formation of formal guidelines, the selection process, training, and the utilization of S.W.A.T. teams by various police departments. In gathering data or information for this research project various resources were utilized including books, periodicals, and the Internet. In addition, research was obtained from a survey of officers from various police departments. The survey was submitted to members of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (Module II) session at Texas Women's University. The members of the survey group were from 16 different departments or agencies. One of the survey group respondents was not from a law enforcement agency. The data collected from the surveys will be examined to determine what departments with S.W.A.T. Teams have established formal guidelines, have put in place a formal selection process, and provided necessary training to establish an effective tactical unit.

## **FINDINGS**

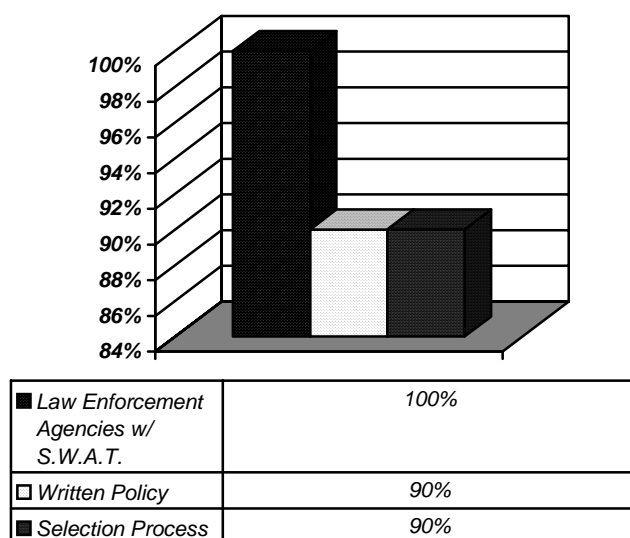
A major source of information utilized in examining this issue is a research survey asking questions associated with population, number of officers, call out procedures, selection process, formal policy, and the need for standardization. The research survey provided to individuals in the Law Enforcement Management Institute (Module II) provided a response rate of 90%. Out of the respondents, 94% were associated with law enforcement agencies and 6% were associated with non-law enforcement agencies (Figure/Table 1). Respondents completing the survey represented 15 different law enforcement agencies.

Figure/Table 1. Survey Group



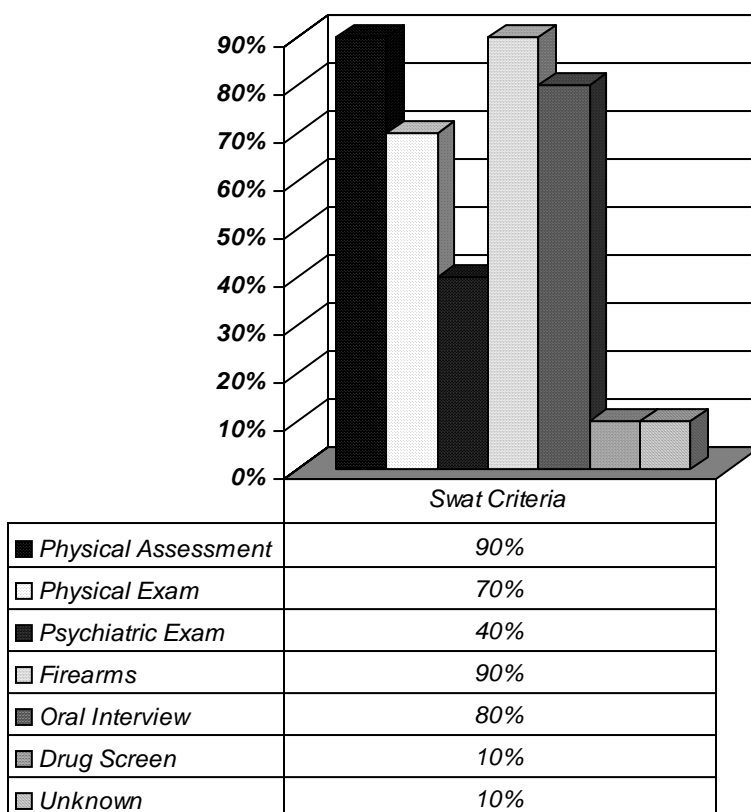
Also, the survey indicated that 66.7% of the law enforcement agencies surveyed utilize S.W.A.T. teams. Upon determining which law enforcement agencies have S.W.A.T. teams, it is necessary to determine the percentage that have a formal written policy and a formal selection process. The survey revealed that 90% of the law enforcement agencies that utilize S.W.A.T. teams have a formal written policy and a formal selection process (Figure/Table 2).

Figure/Table 2. S.W.A.T. Organization



Based on the results of the survey it is clear that different law enforcement agencies utilize various selection criteria. The survey provided varying information regarding the selection process utilized by law enforcement agencies to select S.W.A.T. team members (Figure/Table 3). Based on the information collected from the survey it is apparent that the various law enforcement agencies utilize different criteria. The greatest amount of importance is placed on the physical assessment and the firearms proficiency with 90% of law enforcement agencies with S.W.A.T. teams using these measurements. In addition, the survey determined that 80% of the agencies with S.W.A.T. teams utilize an oral interview, 70% of the agencies utilize medical examinations, 40% of the agencies utilize a psychiatric evaluation, and 10% of the agencies utilize a drug screen. It should be noted that 10% of the survey respondents did not know the selection criteria utilized by their law enforcement agency.

Figure/Table 3. S.W.A.T. Selection



In addition, the survey looked at the issue of standardizing the S.W.A.T. function. The survey defined standardization as “state mandated minimum requirements.” The survey identified three areas that could be considered for standardization. These areas included policy requirements, the selection process, and training. The survey results indicated that 61.1 % of the respondents believe that there is a need for standardization and 38.8% of the respondents believe that there is not a need for standardization. The results of the survey indicated that 55% of the respondents favored standardized policies, 38.8% favored a standardized selection process, and 72.2% of the respondents favored standardized training.

With the recommendations of the Texas Tactical Police Officer’s Association and the California Attorney General’s Commission on Special Weapons and Tactics it is obvious that there is a push to change. As critical incidents occur that cause an examination of existing practices, it is necessary to re-examine how activities are conducted. This becomes very important when 10% of the law enforcement agencies utilizing S.W.A.T. teams have not developed a formal selection process or formal selection process.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

Have police departments taken the necessary steps to guarantee that S.W.A.T. teams are professionally formed and maintained. It is hypothesized that the acceptance and availability of S.W.A.T. teams has led to a need for standard guidelines to govern law enforcement agencies utilizing S.W.A.T. teams. To determine if law enforcement agencies have taken the proper steps to develop and implement the use of a S.W.A.T. team it is necessary to look at the research collected.

First, a major step in creating a S.W.A.T. team is to develop a set of guidelines or policies that dictate proper use. Based on the information collected it is clear that not all of the law



enforcement agencies that utilize S.W.A.T. teams have taken this necessary step. The purpose of formal guidelines or policies is to establish rules that regulate the command structure and the types of activities that tactical teams are to be utilized for. By establishing these necessary guidelines, law enforcement agencies are able to reduce liability and risks associated with the development and use of tactical teams.

Second, law enforcement agencies must develop criteria for the selection of qualified candidates. The different law enforcement agencies surveyed for this paper have a varying degree of activities used for selection of candidates. It is clear that that an emphasis is placed on physical capabilities, oral interview skills and firearms. However, there are other categories that should be examined when making the selections. An important category to consider is a psychiatric evaluation that will help determine if a candidate is properly suited to deal with the added stress of the extreme duties.

Also, a major factor in developing a qualified S.W.A.T. team is the amount and quality of training provided. In every aspect of law enforcement there is a need for training that provides officers with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties. Because of the specialized activities and assignments given to S.W.A.T. teams it becomes even more essential that they have received specialized training on the tactics associated with crisis situations and training on the use of specialized equipment.

Law enforcement agencies and lawmakers must determine if there is a need for standardization in the selection and training of S.W.A.T. teams. Standardization of S.W.A.T. teams refers to the minimum selection/qualifications standards necessary to become a member of a S.W.A.T. team and the minimum number/type of training on an annual basis that law enforcement agencies must provide for S.W.A.T. teams. A major factor in advancing the quality

of policing in the State of Texas has been the creation of the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Education (T.C.L.E.O.S.E.). T.C.L.E.O.S.E. has put in place minimum standards that individuals must meet to be considered police officers and has mandated a minimum number of training hours necessary to maintain a police officer status.

In conclusion, based on the information collected it has become evident that a need for standardization is necessary. Although some law enforcement agencies have taken the necessary steps to create a professional S.W.A.T. team, it is evident that other agencies have not. It must be considered that Ten percent (10%) of the law enforcement agencies utilizing S.W.A.T. teams have not developed a formal written policy or a formal selection process. By not regulating the area of tactical teams it becomes a liability that places the law enforcement community as a professional body into a difficult and dangerous position.

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