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Volunteers in Police Service

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ABSTRACT

Policing in the United States changed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The responsibilities of law enforcement officers grew instantly overnight, as terrorism became a stark reality for departments across the country. Additionally, agencies discovered their budgets strained and existing resources fixed. Needing a new source for assistance, some police administrators broke tradition and turned to the essence of the American spirit – volunteerism. This paper addresses the importance of volunteerism to society and the critical need for Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS). Nearly a decade has passed since the attacks, and many of the same chronic issues still face the country: a crippled economy, limited public resources, and growing community needs. As a result, citizen volunteers should serve in every police agency to provide additional resources while simultaneously promoting community partnerships.

This white paper utilizes a variety of information to analyze the use of volunteers in policing, including academic journals, trade publications, surveys, and books. Volunteers enhance an agency's ability to maximize existing resources, reduce expenses, expand community programs, increase the quality of existing police services, and advance the image of the organization. However, departments must be cautioned about hidden costs necessary to operate a VIPS program, requirements for selecting and training the right people, and the variable acceptance of volunteers inside a police organization. Law enforcement agencies must remain nimble and responsive to a changing environment. In cities across the United States, the addition of Volunteers in Police Service programs has become an increasingly popular way for departments to build community partnerships and maximize available resources.

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism lives within the essential fabric of the American culture. For generations, people have provided countless sums of time and energy to help their fellow man, as individuals, workforces, communities, or regions. The essence to volunteer captivates the American spirit, as witnessed by a strong relationship between self and society. The roots of volunteerism have deeply embedded themselves into the heritage of democratic life as the selfless actions of the citizenry promote and refresh America's civic strength.

It is difficult to define exactly what a volunteer is, as scholars have not established an accepted standard (Bussell & Forbes, 2002). After all, it would be nearly impossible to collapse the world's volunteers into one homogeneous category considering the significant amount of personal variables involved. However, some argue the volunteer's intention or motive will determine if the service can be classified as volunteer work. For purposes of this research, volunteer activity is defined as any activity performed without monetary reward to benefit another person, group, or organization regardless of the reason for activity (Freeman, 1997; Wilson, 2000). It is also important to use the terms volunteerism and voluntarism correctly, as the former produces goods while the latter pertains to the voluntary sector that consumes the collective goods produced by the organization (Ellis, 1985; Wilson, 2000).

Outside observers of the new world found Americans more socially connected within communities. Typically found within a religious framework, associations soon blurred the boundaries of church and state to build the community, facilitate a shared goal, or sway social and political affairs. Within these voluntary associations,

Americans learned practical lessons of cooperation from wars and conflict. For example, in the battle with England for independence, a new found spirit forged an armed force network of volunteers (Skocpol, Ganz & Munsun, 2000). The divisive United States (US) conflict between the North and South eventually brought a “heightened sense of nationality” (Skocpol, et al., 2000, p. 532) to the general volunteer spirit in America. However, by the time the US ended its involvement in the Second World War, a new era began of “government by proxy – the use of third parties rather than government employees and organizations to deliver publicly funded services” (Brudney, 1990a, p. 315).

According to Brudney, volunteerism is naturally “interwoven with the very fabric of American democracy and culture” (1990b, p. 2), dating as far back to the early Anglo-Saxon times of English Common Law (Garry, 1980; Greenberg, 2005; Guclu, 2010; Ren, Zhao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2006) and the initial voyage of the Mayflower (Ellis, 1985). Specifically using volunteers to provide for the common good was evidenced by the unpaid New England “watch and ward societies” of colonial America (Burden, 1988; Garry, 1980; Ren, et al., 2006; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). These early police volunteers formed out of a mutual concern to provide self-defense services, as many felt vulnerable due to a lack of government protection (Guclu, 2010; Ren, et al., 2006; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). Around the time of the Great Depression, politicians began to form official police reserve or auxiliary units, namely as favors to their supporters, and whose role was rarely the enforcement of any laws (Garry, 1980; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986).

Traditionally, police volunteers were those citizens concerned about the safety of their own neighborhoods and the social disorder within their communities (Guclu, 2010; Kelling & Wilson, 1982; Ren, et al., 2006). However, the extensive use of civilian volunteers in all aspects of modern law enforcement did not truly gain momentum until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Aryani, 2005; Gazley & Brudney, 2005; Greenberg, 2005). Up to that point in history, volunteers had only occupied very conventional roles in policing that reinforced the classical public administration vision: assisting the agency in bureaucratic roles (i.e., filing, sorting, and organizing) (Brudney, 1990a). In 2002, President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address urged every citizen to serve their community through a variety of different roles: police, fire, medical, emergency response, and neighborhood watch.

Managed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and funded through the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, the Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program was established on May 30, 2002 (Godshall, 2009). Its inaugural challenge was to discover how many law enforcement volunteer programs actually existed and what resources they would need to produce value to their agency and community (Godshall, 2009). Ending decades of unorganized police volunteer programs, the new standardized operation, for the first time, would bring the country's law enforcement agencies together. The initiative would start with only 76 departments using volunteer across the United States (Godshall, 2009).

From the pressures of presidential support and the impact of deeply waning local budgets, municipal governments soon recognized the need to do something different to

deliver a more cost-effective service (Brudney & Duncombe, 1992). This call for a new governance (Salamon, 2002) and the charge to do more with less (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986) transitioned once forsaken community inputs to critical components of a comprehensive service-delivery strategy. The array of volunteer opportunities within a police department could be limitless as long as administrators remained open-minded and employees accepted the help (Brudney, 1990a). Therefore, this paper demonstrates that citizen volunteers should serve in every police agency to provide additional necessary resources while simultaneously promoting community partnerships.

POSITION

There are many positive reasons why volunteers should be utilized within a police department. Inevitably, department administrators are searching for resourceful techniques to maximize existing resources (Chouinard, 2003) and reduce expenses (Brudney, 1990a), while providing financial savings to the department. Additional benefits include the further development of community programs, a contribution to the quality of existing police services, and the advancement of the department's image within the community (Brudney, 1993).

The first and most common incentive to implement a VIPS program relates to financial advantages and cost savings (Brudney, 1990a, 1993; Guclu, 2010; Sharp, 1999). Agencies find these alternatives extremely important as federal funding and grants diminish (Kanable, 2006), employees enlisted in the military reserves are activated for wartime duty, and departments are tasked with increasing homeland security responsibilities (Ren, et al., 2006). Doors previously closed to volunteers were

now opened with the hope of attracting a possible way out of budget shortfalls (Brudney, 1993; Schmidt, 2006). Godshall (2009) noted, “volunteers would maximize an agency’s existing resources by allowing staff to fulfill their primary policing and enforcement functions while volunteers take on ancillary responsibilities” (p. 50). Additionally, by supplementing the force with volunteers, agencies discover another way to avoid adding paid personnel (Anonymous, 1996; Brudney & Duncombe, 1992) and eliminating workforce shortages (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). Some departments have also reported less overtime salary expenditures because of the volunteer help (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986).

Law enforcement agencies with volunteer programs would be able to expand their capabilities by offering the potential for a wider variety of services that were not previously available while now able to boost staffing during extreme peak periods of agency hardship. Brudney (1993) referred to this phenomenon as “coproduction,” whereby the cooperative use of citizens to free public employees from performing generalized tasks can ultimately increase the overall productivity of the paid workforce. The staff are liberated to concentrate on more technical or advanced tasks (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). The ability to expand the scope of public services is often a result of volunteers being able to produce one or more services independently for the agency. Providing department staff members with the opportunity to do more meaningful work should increase effective performance, improve the ability of the agency to solve offenses, prevent criminal episodes and disorder, and safeguard the concerns of any crime victims (Brudney, 1993; Ren, et al., 2006; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986).

Through the addition of volunteers to the workforce, police departments could effectively capitalize on the inherent knowledge, skills, and abilities that an unpaid citizen brings to the organization. These collective new talents would improve the quality of services offered by the organization. In fact, a volunteer's inherent desire to help their community would provide customers with a more committed, personalized, creative, and attentive experience with the agency (Brudney, 1993; Ren, et al., 2006). Further, it boosts the agency's ability to remain responsive to well-liked programs and citizen requests (Brudney, 1990a).

VIPS typically find extreme personal satisfaction with the training, education, and sense of mission the department provides to ensure that customers receive an exceptional service experience (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). This "active citizen participation" gives the community a greater sense of understanding about the conflicts facing the police department (Ren, et al., 2006, p. 466), and it often enrolls them in the fight against social disorder or broken window maintenance (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Due to the resource-driven reprioritization of police goals, the citizens' active participation in community crime prevention has been a recent and valuable occurrence not previously witnessed by generations of Americans (Bayley & Shearing, 1996). In the words of former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, "Volunteers can assist police in performing routine duties that are necessary to the efficient operation of their department. Though the work may not be glamorous, it is essential" (Chouinard, 2003, p. 29).

Sometimes the effects of a volunteer program are intangible, whereas making the benefits difficult to measure and observe. From advancing the agency's public

image to increasing public support, a VIPS program has a wide range of positive opportunities due to the shared responsibility between the government and the governed (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Brudney, 1993). From consumer to producer, people in the community use trust, empathy, respect, and understanding for each other to partner with the police and become leaders within their own neighborhoods (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Brudney, 1990a; Chouinard, 2003). These new ambassadors find themselves providing valuable citizen feedback into the police department, which ultimately improves police-community relations (Anonymous, 1996; Godshall, 2009; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). John Skinner, a police chief in Port St. Lucie, Florida, commented that “When you’ve got a volunteer group who is very supportive of the department, the public trust builds... It’s not the chief’s department; it’s the community’s department” (Kanable, 2006, p. 18).

COUNTER POSITION

When deciding about utilizing VIPS in a police agency, administrators often struggle with several counter arguments, namely funding, frailty, and acceptance. Despite the apparent cost savings associated with a volunteer program, there is also concern about locating the funding necessary for the implementation of such an initiative. VIPS programs typically have operational costs associated with them (Brudney, 1993), such as the “recruitment, selection, training, supervision, and rewarding of volunteers” (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986, p. 56). Organizations that fail to plan for such costs will be disillusioned when trying to operationalize the program (Brudney, 1990a), as VIPS are not free (Brudney & Duncombe, 1992).

In reality, the use of volunteers would reimburse most expenses when compared to the value received (Schmidt, 2006), and they allow for more productivity from the agency (Anonymous, 1996). Therefore, some departments have successfully demonstrated to city council members or private foundations the value of the cost-effective service in order to receiving necessary funding (Brudney, 1990a; Kanable, 2006; Sharp, 1999). The commitment of public money is actually fairly insignificant when computing the economic value of a volunteer's time and service to the agency (Brudney, 1990a). Finally, the deciding factor might be the head administrator's subjective value of VIPS (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986), as evidenced by Goose Creek (SC) Police Chief Richard Ruonala's statement: "To tell you the truth, in a department our size and a city our size, we couldn't survive without this volunteer help" (Burden, 1988, p. 25).

Some skeptics do not believe that volunteers can exist in police work, as they consider them unreliable, inconsistent, unable to maintain confidentiality, and inept for the challenges of policing (Anonymous, 1996; Brudney, 1993; Sundeen & Siegel, 1986). In summary, volunteers would fail as police workers. This mismatch might originate from differing priorities, viewpoints, and/or lack of interest between the volunteers and the police (Brudney, 1990a; Sharp, 1999). However, just because a police department is a public agency, it does not mean they must accept everyone (Sharp, 1999).

Instead, agencies have improved their ranks through the selection and training process, whereby volunteers undergo background checks (i.e., criminal and traffic record, personal and professional references, credit check, and possibly polygraph and/or drug testing) depending on their assignment in the organization (Anonymous,

1996; Schmidt, 2006; Sharp, 1999). Additionally, through an interview process, VIPS are intimately exposed to the organization's mission and values statement. Once accepted, the volunteers would be influenced by the agency's specific written guidelines, code of ethics (Schmidt, 2006), and chain of command, as these are commonly accepted means of controlling and regulating behavior (Brudney, 1990a). To remove concerns of dependability, many agencies have constructed volunteer assignments around project-based initiatives rather than scheduled-based tasks (Anonymous, 1996). Also, VIPS would need steady oversight by a professional volunteer coordinator, thorough orientation, exposure to department personnel, and tailored job-specific training (Schmidt, 2006).

Despite all their benefits, some police professionals believe volunteers are the government's way of replacing wage and benefit earners with free labor, effecting depleting jobs. Union leaders argue this uneasiness is generating tension within the workforce (Anonymous, 1996; Burden, 1988). Garry (1980) identified that "the Police Benevolent Association opposes the concept, categorizing the volunteers as social misfits, misguided do-gooders, scabs, and vigilantes" (p. 5). If employees, supervisors, and political leaders no longer provide organizational support to volunteers, then the program suffocates (Brudney, 1993). Unchecked, this conflict could extend between volunteers and staff members, volunteers and volunteers, and, ultimately, volunteers and citizens (Anonymous, 1996).

Agency administrators must set the tone for the program by clearly identifying that VIPS are intended to expand staff not replace them (Godshall, 2009; Kanable, 2006; Schmidt, 2006). Sundeen and Siegel (1986) conducted a survey to measure

officer attitudes toward volunteers, and they discovered only initial mistrust by officers. Overwhelming citizen support of the officers has helped departments overcome any sense of doubt (Sundeen & Siegel, 1986), providing few concerns for administrators or the general public (Brudney, 1993). One agency noted the following about their VIPS program, “it’s been very, very successful. The officers are crazy about the volunteers. They’re treated like kings...it’s been a real good working relationship” (Burden, 1988, p. 26).

RECOMMENDATION

Approximately 1,930 law enforcement agencies in all 50 states currently host a VIPS program (Godshall, 2009), and in a random IACP survey of 306 law enforcement agencies, it was determined that only 83% of those agencies currently utilize volunteers in their organizations (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). However, for 2008, the U.S. Department of Justice reported the establishment of more than 14,100 police agencies across the country (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Considering that 63% of U.S. police departments are anticipating budget cuts in response to the recession (Colvin, 2009), staggering numbers reveal that now is the opportunity for volunteer expansion within the law enforcement sector. Therefore, citizen volunteers should serve in every police agency to provide additional necessary resources while simultaneously promoting community partnerships.

Agency administrators are the keystone to successfully implementing a volunteers in policing program, as their support and enthusiasm is critical to gaining the support from all the various stakeholders within the community. Once the decision has been made to realize nonpaid workers, the department must look inward to conduct a

needs assessment that will determine where volunteers can provide the biggest impact on operations. This appraisal will provide the foundation for the VIPS program's goals, objectives, and mission. With the full confidence of departmental leaders, a volunteer coordinator would be selected to professional administer the program functions: recruiting, selection, and training. The agency's written rules and directives will establish governance over the program, while also providing organizational guidance on the eligibility and character requirements for all citizen participants (Godshall, 2009).

If properly implemented and managed, volunteer programs can produce significant benefits to the law enforcement agency and the associated community. First, VIPS provide incredible value to the department compared to the minor costs associated with startup. Second, the agency can provide expanded programs and additional services through the addition of non-paid personnel, whereby freeing up staff members to perform more job-critical tasks. Third, volunteers help enhance the organization's quality outputs, ranging from improved customer service to specialized skills and talents. Finally, one of the most valuable side effects of a VIPS program is the intangible benefits the department and community receive from the synergy associated with volunteer assistance.

There are skeptical administrators that refuse to implement volunteers in their organization. Typically, these concerns relate to funding, frailty, and acceptance; however, all can be reduced or eliminated with prior planning, sincere participation, and honest transparency. Very few programs in law enforcement have a predictive rate of return, but VIPS programs have demonstrated their ability to pay for themselves, as evidenced by the Independent Sector's current estimate of a volunteer's time at \$20.85

per hour (Independent Sector, 2009). Most agency liability or confidentiality concerns are eliminated with proper selection and training of the volunteer staff. With some introductions and committed partnerships, most officers become very reliant upon volunteer assistance and question how the department operated without them.

In summary, modern law enforcement is facing a growing list of demands with a diminishing list of resources. The profession must rely upon the partnership with its community to achieve its goals and mission. Historically, the United States has relied upon the compassion of its citizenry to join and provide for the common good, and present time is no exception. Whether citizen interests are fueled by acts of terrorism, increasing crime rates, or signs of social disorder, neighborhood volunteers offer a viable solution to some of the toughest issues facing policing today. Hence, "Volunteers aren't paid...not because they're worthless, but because they are priceless" (Sharp, 1999, p. 206).

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