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**The Need for a Police Information Officer within a
Law Enforcement Agency**

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ABSTRACT

The profession of law enforcement is surrounded by life altering events at a moment's notice. Law enforcement, in general, is one of the most intriguing jobs in the world that often capture people's attention. In today's society, with all the advancements of technology, people are attracted to the news that delivers the most up to date incidents involving police officers. Having a designated police information officer within the department can make the difference. The public perception of the local police department is extremely important. Maintaining a positive image is essential in building a solid foundation between a community and the police department. A police information officer has the ability to accomplish this demand. A position such as this can provide up to date and immediate yet filtered information to the public, seizing the opportunity and demonstrate the transparency of a police department. The police department will also have the ability to form a professional relationship with the local media through the police information officer, as the profession of law enforcement in general has had a tendency to shy away from the local media.

Unfortunately, certain obstacles could occur as a result of creating or implementing a police information officer. Budget constraints might play a factor in starting a new position as well as having sufficient manpower available to support the position. Additionally, the police information officer gives a story from a law enforcement perspective which, in turn, could be taken in a negative light during a sensitive incident. Overall, in looking at the police information officer, it would provide the public an insight look into the department, creating an open and humanistic feel behind the badge that the average person can relate too.

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of law enforcement, a life-changing event can occur at the blink of an eye. What started out as a routine day for officers can quickly change at a moment's notice. Once this happens, the event starts to unfold and until it can be placed under control, it appears to be a chaotic scene. With all the commotion from law enforcement and the accompanying departments, such as fire and emergency ambulances, the nearby public begins to swarm the immediately surround the scene. Not far behind the general public, the news media starts to show up and begins to set up the necessary equipment to establish a mobile news station. From a police officer's perspective at the scene, this can be overwhelming. Not only does the police officer have to work, and maintain the scene at hand, the officer now has to deal with the presence of onlookers and, more importantly, the news media, which will broadcast a story. As this example illustrates, the need and importance of having a police information officer to provide answers has never been greater in today's society.

Law enforcement agencies across the country are realizing how vital it is to possess a police information officer. Police departments need to be able to provide immediate yet filtered information to the public. Having the luxury of a police information officer will be able to this function in a professional way. Additionally, with the evolution of social media and the general public having access to real time information, it is essential for police departments to have the ability to showcase the department in a positive manner. A police information officer can take an emergency scene and incorporate it with public relations, embracing the opportunity to show the public what the police department can do.

For years, law enforcement in general has had a tendency to shy away from the news media. This type of behavior is a thing of a past as technology has forced law enforcement to come to a realization that a partnership is a must. The police information officer within a police department can help tremendously in bridging the gap between both professions. If done properly, the police information officer will be able to utilize the media for the benefit of the department in so many levels. Law enforcement agencies should employ the services of a police information officer to convey accurate and real time information.

POSITION

The law enforcement profession is one of the most visible jobs in the world. Reason being, society in general is filled with people that are intrigued with the news. More times than not, the news is covering an incident that involves the local police department. With the public drawn to that kind of media coverage, police departments need to take advantage of this golden opportunity and show the public a law enforcement perspective. The police information officer will have the ability to convey solid and effective communication to the starving public and, more importantly, give the police agency a positive image. This can be easily accomplished with a friendly partnership with the local media. Mallory (2009) stated, "A law enforcement agency that employs a police information officer stated, "Done properly, good media relations informs the public, involve the citizenry in police operations and gains respect for the agency as a superior law enforcement entity" (para. 1). As this agency relayed, having the respect from the community that they served is crucial. A police information officer

can put the public's faith and trust right back into the police department during an unfortunate event.

The public perception of the local police department is extremely important. The police information officer is the face of the department and through this officer the public will gain the trust and confidence in the police department. Fortunately, the police information officer can be used in other ways than just speaking the negative news. For example, as an article by Bean-Mellinger (n.d.) stated, "A police department PIO might create goodwill by talking to children at school assemblies" (para.5). To further gain the public trust, the police information officer can do a segment on how the police department is trying new innovated ways in combating crime in a problematic area of the city. This will provide a large billboard effect across the department and when people see a police officer on the road, they will be able to associate them with what the police information officer stated. Moreover, during the holidays, the police information officer can explain to the public the importance of safety in locking valuables or promote a special program such as Blue Santa drive. Overall, the public can relate to the police information officer during the best times of a police department. Morley and Jacobson (2007) stated, "One of their most important and enjoyable responsibilities is to act as head cheerleader, seizing opportunities to cast their agency in a positive light while helping the members of the media address their own needs" (para. 6.).

In law enforcement, the main obligation to the community is to protect and serve. The word serve has several different meanings; however, one meaning that truly emerges is communication. The public wants and, at times, demands to hear what is going on within the community they live. It is imperative that public servants share

important information with the people. Having a police information officer would definitely ease this task, as they will be able to provide accurate and real-time information. For example, the town of Garner discusses the public information officer and a communication plan. The town of Garner (2010) stated, "The PIO will work to continuously seek the best ways for the town to communicate its priorities and to achieve its policy objectives" (para. 1). Whether it is through the means of social media such as Twitter or communicating directly with the local news media, vital information will be provided to the public.

In today's media society, people watch the news religiously as they view the media as a free voice among the people. As law enforcement professionals, there is a need to seize the opportunity and demonstrate the transparency of a police department. In researching this point, it was discovered that Motschall and Cao (2002) stated, "Law enforcement professionals equate good publicity with a positive public image" (para.5). A police information officer will have the capability in cooperating with the new media, supplying them the information they need for a news story, while at the same time allowing only pertinent information to the public. Additionally, a police information officer can also provide a press release for media.

Technology today has given the public the power to be at any location from the comfort of their home and the palm of their hand. Social media has made this possible for the public, and instead of going against technology, the police information officer can use this for the betterment of a police department. Take for instance, Twitter or Instagram, which allows people to relay real time information through the means of words or actual pictures. A police information officer will be able to meet the public

demands of knowledge of an incident, while keeping the news and the public satisfied. Poirier (2013) stated, "Social media is simply another tool in the toolbox of a communications professional (the PIO) to use and reach his/her target audience" (para. 4.).

When a major incident occurs within a city, it is customary to have different divisions of the police department respond such as patrol, investigating detectives, and if fortunate, a police information officer. Naturally, once the word has spread, it will not be long before the news media responds as well. A police information officer can immediately meet and greet the news media and begin discussing what is taking place. Chermak (2005) stated, "One of the proactive strategies implemented by police organizations to try to manage this external pressure is the appointment of public information officers (PIOs)" (p. 33.). As simple and straightforward as this might sound, having the police information officer is priceless for several main reasons at a time like this. First and foremost, the police information officer acted as an invisible shield, separating the news media from the officers and investigators at the scene, allowing them to basically work. Secondly, the police information officer was able to speak to the news media first before the media located a possible witness. An issue that is all too common is the fact the news media is there to a job and will report a story no matter what. With that being said, if the news media does not have the chance to talk to the police, they will find a witness who may not know the facts or an excitable witness that might cause alarm to the public. At any rate, it is essential for an agency to deploy the police information officer to speak with the media to provide the right information in a calm professional manner not to alarm the public.

In addition, to relieving the pressure of the investigators at the scene, a police information officer will also be able to help with the investigation. At the initial scene, a police information officer is trained and has the power to release only pertinent information on the incident. They are careful to not hinder the investigation by releasing the wrong or too much information. Moreover, when the time right and the investigators are ready to release suspect information, a police information officer can set up a press conference. During this process, once the information is given, a police information officer has the capability of fielding questions from reporters. Again, they will be exhibiting professionalism as the face of the department in a calm demeanor, ensuring the public everything is under control. Overall, without a police information officer providing this service to the news media, they will find other means to fill a news void, which may in the long in run cause a disruption in the case.

COUNTER POSITION

One of most challenging times for a police department is budget time. A police department could use so many new things to keep up with ever changing times, such as a police information officer. However, a perfect world is not always the case and financial constraints on a police department can immediately crush the dream of having an integral piece such as the police information officer. In the event an agency hires a police information officer from the outside, careful and detailed planning is needed in order to accomplish this feat. For instance, a department must consider how much the officer's total weighted salary would be to include any benefits package the city has to officer. Additionally, a police department would also have to take into consideration the amount of possible overtime that would be allocated for this officer, as this position

would be a twenty-four seven-response expectation. When a police department begins to add up the cost of such a position, it slowly becomes a distant want, especially for smaller agencies that are usually limited in the financial abilities department. A law enforcement agency would need to expand its personnel in order to for this position to join the ranks. This is easier said than done as in most cases, the need for patrol officers would take precedence in this situation if the choice were given to an outside source.

Should a police department attempt to implement the role of a police information officer within its ranks, this could also be detrimental to the department as well. Having an officer that solely acts as an information officer will definitely take away from the normal duties of a patrol or investigation officer, thus possibly leaving a shift shorthanded and could also limit the department in providing that extra help in the field. Creating this position might cause animosity among the officers within the department. For example, a patrol level officer may not understand or see the big picture the department is attempting to accomplish when incorporating a police information officer. The patrol officer would only see the amount of work that has increased for them as a result from an officer being pulled from the ranks.

Although, the financial strain's and movement of personal cause a threat to the idea, in the City of Lakewood, the concept of having a dual role exists. According to their department website, the City of Lakewood (2011) states, "The Public Information Officer (PIO) for the Lakewood Police Department is not a full time position. The PIO assignment is an additional duty to the Criminal Investigations Lieutenant" (para. 1). By this evidence, it clearly illustrates that a police department can foster the idea of a police

information officer without hindering financial or a decrease of manpower within the ranks.

The role of a police information officer is an important one and as mentioned if done correctly, it could perform wonders for a police department. However, what happens if the wrong employee assumes this position within a police department, the outcome could be devastating, creating a stone wall between a police department and the media or the general public. More importantly, an agency's image could be tarnished causing a major trust issue. Another way a police information officer can hinder the true potential of this position is writing a poor press release or not returning phone calls on an important event that took place. The news media relies on detailed information from the officer and unfortunately, if a press release contains limited information or is filled with grammatical errors, then that is a direct reflection on the department. Furthermore, not returning the necessary telephone calls to establish good communication with the media or the public are examples of adding to the aforementioned stone wall. These are prime opportunities for the police information officer to seize the moment to return the calls and have a solid press release to promote the department in a positive manner. If not, this says volumes about a police department and the personnel that are employed there. However, with the right training and the right person in place, this position can flourish. Hughes and Leysia (2012) stated, "The primary responsibility of a PIO is to communicate correct, up-to-date information concerning the status of emergency incidents to the media, members of the public, and other directly or indirectly affected stakeholders" (para.22).

In the law enforcement profession, there is an old belief among all police officer's, that no matter where in the world an officer is employed or what capacity in a department they hold, they are all one family and bleed the color blue. In the streets, police officers back one another on various calls, relying on each other day in and day out to make it home safely at night. The general public knows this fact and often times will say police officers cover for each other, especially during a controversy that may surround a police department. Having a police information officer might contribute to this belief as well. For example, if a shooting occurs within a city that involved a police officer and an armed eleven year old juvenile and the boy died. The police information officer would represent the police department and more than likely describe the incident from a law enforcement perspective. From a grieving family and possibly majority of the public, the consensus might be that the police information officer is covering up for the police department. In situations like this one, people do not want to hear policy or procedures or a vague description of what happen, even though it might be the truth. The normal person wants to hear compassion in a voice and not an explanation in a robotic manner. A police information officer as an employee must adhere to the rules of the department they represent and, unfortunately, it may appear to be one sided.

In some cases, the public might be right, a police information officer advancing through the ranks may in fact be trying to downplay or even cover up for a fellow police officer that may, in fact, have been in the wrong. With this position comes great responsibility in the sense that a police information officer has the power to portray and release a story to the public as they see fit. With that being stated, it is important to convey the right information as the public and the media are clever enough to see right

through a fabricated story. Unfortunately, once a story or statement is released by the police department and it is not truthful, the department as a whole suffers the consequences and the faith and trust in the police department is compromised. With that being stated, with an effective police information officer this would not be an issue. A truth and integrity driven person in this position knows how to be efficient with the information given to them. Knowing their audience and how to be open with the public, yet keeping the department in mind is the key. Davis (2010) stated, "Effective PIOs know how the media in their community works and how to release information quickly and accurately" (para. 6).

RECOMMENDATION

The police information officer is truly a vital and essential position to have within a police department. Without a doubt, law enforcement agencies can benefit from the services of such a position, which can only strengthen the department as whole. The police information officer can and have proved they can promote a better public perception for the police department. This type of service is priceless especially in the event a police department is under scrutiny for unfavorable circumstances. Additionally, as mentioned in the paper, the public demands and wants to know about what is transpiring around them. A police information officer can meet and fulfill these demands by providing accurate and real time information to the general public. From an internal standpoint, having the ally of a police information officer on your side can mean the difference. They will be able to relieve investigating officers in order for them to do their job effectively and at the same time provide an outlet to the public for assistance in an investigation.

On the other hand, having such a position, especially in smaller agencies can definitely cause financial budget and possible personnel constraints. Stretching the budget or a short-handed department can place stress within the culture of the department. However this paper provides an excellent strategy to combat this potential threat. In addition, the fear of covering for other officers and the fact an invisible barrier can be created are also concerns accompanying this position. These concerns were addressed and discussed in detail within this paper, showing that these issues can be overcome.

This paper showed ways on how a police department can obtain a position of a police information officer. If the luxury is absent in a smaller agency, research indicated that it could be done within the ranks, employing the services of an existing officer to be crossed trained to do this job. Overall, the time is now for every law enforcement agency across the country to have a police information officer for the very reasons that were mentioned in this paper. The public deserves and has the right to know what is going on. It is the job of the police department to deliver the news with the help of media in a professional manner.

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