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Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Police Officers in Small Agencies

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ABSTRACT

The lack of quality and quantity applicants interested in law enforcement has caused a shift in the way small agencies, such as Schertz Police Department, look at recruiting tactics. The purpose of this research paper is to identify the problems in recruiting and retention of officers and adjust current recruiting methods to entice quality applicants. The usual methods of newspaper ads and word of mouth do not work as effectively as they did in the past and small departments must explore other options for bringing employees to their agencies. Cities must include in their budgets the funds and personnel needed for recruitment to achieve desired results. Human Resources and administration must identify and take corrective action to keep experienced officers once they are hired and trained. The answer to the question of recruiting and retention qualified officers is one that cannot be easily answered. By recognizing the recruiting challenges such as generation differences and minority opportunities, and by developing long term strategies that target those who have the necessary qualities for a career in law enforcement, the manpower hunt will become less of a burden.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important functions in law enforcement agencies today is recruiting qualified officers. Personal experience and interviews with other agencies dictate that all of law enforcement is experiencing similar problems finding qualified applicants. So the question as to, "where will the next generation of police officers come from?" will be explored.

Smaller agencies, those with fewer than 50 sworn officers, suffer most from the shortages because of fierce competition with higher salaried and better-budgeted large agencies. This leaves small agencies to attract and hire those who were not selected, just starting their careers and needing experience, or those who simply wanted to work in small towns. Thus small agencies have become training grounds whereby officers gain knowledge and experience and then move on to larger, better paying agencies. This not only leaves a manpower shortage, but also depletes already strained budgets in those departments.

The current method of recruitment in a sample survey (LEMIT class #54, Module I and the same survey given to Schertz Police Department employees) shows that word of mouth is the most utilized along with the placement of newspaper ads in the employment section of one or two local papers. The internet has also been used, but does not seem to be effective for this writer's agency. Given the low number of qualified applicants seeking a career in law enforcement smaller agencies must find new, more appealing means to attract applicants. By examining recruiting techniques this writer hopes to show

that changes in small agency recruitment efforts could aid in a larger applicant pool of desirable persons. This in turn would help save money spent on the advertising, and monies spent on the training of replacement officers.

The purpose of this research is to show that different hiring practices could be useful in small agencies that must compete against larger agencies and each other in obtaining qualified employees. It is intended to help small agencies recognize recruitment and retention problems and bring about refinements to programs, policies and initiatives. A review of journals, periodicals, books, Internet sources, personal interviews and a survey will indicate past and present trends and practices.

This paper will point out some of the problems facing small agencies and will examine methods to recruit and retain officers without breaking their budgets. Information gathered during research will allow small agencies to look at their current methods and bring about improvements that will fill vacancies with desirable personnel and ensure community safety by maintaining an experienced workforce.

The findings will indicate that by thinking outside the box, changing their current ways of recruiting and by exploring innovative ideas that will appeal to a different, younger generation they can be competitive in the law enforcement recruitment game.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recruitment and retention has been recognized as one of the major issues facing public safety departments today. Interviews with two Chiefs of Police in small agencies near San Antonio, Texas echoed the problems that plague other small departments in recruiting. The problem is not enough qualified, interested people to fill the openings as

police officers. This problem is of major concern to both large and small departments. However small agencies face larger barriers. One reason is due to the fact that surrounding small towns compete with each other for the same applicant pool according to Chief Syd Hall, Selma Police Department (personal interview June 2003). Another of the barriers faced by smaller departments in recruiting personnel is competition with the private sector and larger agencies that can offer better salaries with handsome benefit packages and the chance for advancement. Personal experience dictates that in Schertz and surrounding small towns, all of law enforcement is experiencing similar problems of finding qualified applicants willing to put their lives on the line for meager salaries. In a personal interview with Chief Luis Collazo, Seguin Police Department (November 2003) he stated that law enforcement recruiters and human resource personnel must work together and seek new methods to appeal to the young generation and changes must be made in our current recruitment attitudes. Personal involvement in the hiring process has shown this writer that not only are small agencies competing from the same applicant pool, but that it is a shallow pool. The applicants are either new to the profession with no experience at all, or they have been around a long time skipping from department to department for various reasons. Some will never pass the written exam, physical, agility course nor the extensive background implemented by most departments.

Baby boomers” have started retiring at an alarming rate and young people are entering the “high tech” career fields where salaries and benefits far exceed what smaller agencies can offer. If one had the choice of being a police officer or working in the private sector for the same money, but with holidays and week ends off; working 9 to 5 and peaceful, pleasant surroundings, which would one choose (Kanable 2001)? With the

increasingly stringent requirements for becoming a peace officer along with negative press coverage and the number of on duty police deaths, it is no wonder people are making the conscious decision not to enter the law enforcement career field.

Since the 9-11 attacks recruitment has been affected dramatically across all agencies because of additional funding required for homeland security measures and additional mandated law enforcement training. This puts an undue burden on small city budgets causing the recruitment initiative to suffer and competition for officers to increase. Today's young people are more interested in technology. Independent minded youth of today are not attracted to policing as a career because they do not like the paramilitary hierarchy associated with police agencies and they don't like being micro-managed (National Center for Women in Policing). This group has become known as "Generation X". Generation Xers are defined as a group of people born between 1961 and 1981. Most grew up in a single parent family, military service was voluntary, and they had computers, TV and video games available to them. They are concerned with their own personal status, they are more racially diverse, believe that hard work is not the quickest way to fame and fortune and will most likely change jobs several times in their career. They are not as concerned with tradition, job security or likely to be loyal to one agency (Zemke, 1999). However, law enforcement must find a way to appeal to this generation and look at areas that interest and encourage them to become a valued member of the department. By pointing out the communication skills, technology or the sciences used in the police field, departments can interest these young people in the exciting career of police service. Police work is after all, more than writing tickets and arresting the bad guys.

A number of factors, including low starting pay, poor officer morale, stringent requirements for becoming an officer, negative media attention and department scandals have all caused people to shy away from the police profession according to the National Association of Police Organizations (Chicago Associated Press, 2000).

Other issues important in recruiting officers to a small department are the location of the city and the reputation of the department. This includes city and governing body reputation, school district, crime rate, convenience to shopping and tax base to name a few. These issues are important to officers that have families and are concerned with adequate schools for children, availability of good housing and job opportunities for spouses. These important factors will lend themselves to a satisfied officer and one who will stay with the department for a longer period of time.

Law enforcement agencies have traditionally waited for qualified candidates to read the ads and come to their testing. This approach can no longer be taken. Departments need to be aggressive and develop specific plans that address their needs. Management must assess their organization and community, set goals and build on strategies that will lead to the desired outcome. Advantage must be taken of the opportunities available to include the use of modern technologies such as the Internet and recruitment videos. Although for some small agencies recruitment occurs through personal contact and word of mouth, assigning a seasoned officer as a recruiter has been an effective way to increase interest in the department and raise the number of persons applying for the next opening.

With more women entering the work force, especially in what use to be dominately male occupations, we must find ways to encourage their interest in the law

enforcement field. A recruiter who has studied this problem will know that males and females do not necessarily look for the same benefits in a career field. The same techniques and incentives that would be of interest to a “Xer” or retiring military member would not entice a single mother of two. Department recruiters must target an audience and sell their department. Recruiters must portray department image and know their policies, mission statement and goals in order to recruit the best applicants (Hawk, 1967).

Additional resources to be considered are; explorer/cadet programs, high school criminal justice classes, military separation centers, college campus counseling, citizens’ police academies, department open house and minority job fairs. Interaction with the community is another resource to a successful program. While placing advertisements in the paper may begin the process, it is not enough. Recruiters must get out in the community and have one on one contact with prospective applicants. They must reflect attitudes, appearance, goals and aspirations of the department they represent (Kanable 2001).

Brochures and videos will increase awareness and interest in the department. These can be marketing tools in high schools, colleges and job fairs. Recruiting efforts should be creative and get the message out to people who genuinely want to serve others (Strandberg, 2004). Brochures should reflect a true picture of your department and include the mission statement. Pictures of currently employed officers or other personnel will make it more interesting and inviting. All branches of the military use these techniques to fill their vacancies with a high success rate. Involving the whole department with this project will increase the individual recruitment interest of the officers and give them a sense of accomplishment and belonging.

Once an officer has been recruited and trained, retention becomes the next obstacle. Present day employees are less inclined to spend their careers with a single agency. The average length of an officer's employment is 34 months before leaving (Yearwood and Freeman, 2004). The main reasons given for this was limited opportunities for promotion, and a failure to receive an increase in salary or only a slight increase over original starting pay. Other reasons cited were not appreciated, dissatisfaction with supervisors, lack of communication and/or training and personal problems. In order to retain the best officers, departments will need to go beyond the traditional salary enticements, benefit packages and retirement plans. Many agencies have tried new shift schedules to allow officers more family time, take home cars as incentive, signing bonuses and educational rewards. Today's leaner budgets limit monetary rewards that were once available to deserving or long-term employees in smaller agencies. In some departments even yearly cost of living raises have become a thing of the past. As a result, department administration will need to be aggressive in developing innovative ways to reward and retain employees. It must be brought to the attention of the city administration, human resources, city council, and yes, even to the community the cost of recruiting and retraining new officers instead of retaining seasoned officers. By doing so they will become more likely to support budget and salary increases when requested. Community approval of a police department has an impact on how many persons choose to work and stay with the agency.

Changes must be made to maintain knowledge and experience that long-term officers have to contribute. The continuity of teamwork in the organization depends upon

retaining good, seasoned officers and using them as mentors. Mentoring is another tool that has been used in some agencies with good results. Mentoring is defined as a mutually beneficial relationship in which a knowledgeable and skilled veteran officer provides insight, guidance and developmental opportunities to a lesser skilled and experienced colleague (Krandall, 2000).

Along with mentoring as a recruiting and retention tool, departments need to look to creating a work environment that provides employees with a feeling of personal value to the department. They will be inclined to stay with the department longer if they feel appreciated for their contributions and derive a purpose from their assignments. In this area smaller departments have a slight edge over larger departments where employees feel they are just a warm body filling a slot. Small agency administration has the opportunity to get to know the officers one on one and know their families. There is a more family oriented feeling that promotes loyalty to the department and satisfaction on the job.

Jobs need to be continuously reviewed and redesigned as job descriptions, new technology and State and Federal laws change. As part of the job redesign mechanism, law enforcement agencies must involve line level employees who will have first hand information on how their duties are changing and how best to implement these changes. The key to success will be a department where employees can give honest and candid feedback without fear of humiliation or reprisal. Departments must implement cross training. That is learning to match employees to job assignments that take advantage of their skills. This will allow the officers/employee to become more diverse and broaden

their understanding of the department. They will emerge as problem solvers and care takers of the community they patrol and allow agencies to do more with less.

METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on the problems which smaller departments face with the continuing battle for qualified candidates. This writer has offered some ideas to be examined in the recruiting initiatives of small departments. Some of those ideas include appointing a recruiter for your department and training all personnel in the department to become recruiters.

Brochures, training videos and certainly more advertising in local papers are useful tools. Job fairs must not be forgotten, but explore minority job fairs too. By examining current trends and practices, coupled with an understanding of the available workforce, recruiting methods may be implemented by smaller departments to effectively create a larger and more qualified applicant pool for their agencies.

A police agency is no better than the aggregate of its individual members. Administration has an obligation to the department as a whole and the community to see that people with high morals, ethics and a genuine desire to do police work are a part of the department. After these people are hired administration must then focus on retention. Why retention, you may ask. The cost to recruit, hire and train persons for a peace officer positions can drain a small agency's budget. The department needs to do their best to keep experienced personnel and maintain teamwork. They must look at the physical working conditions and make improvements if possible. Other problems, that would

cause good officers to leave, include low pay, personal problems, dissatisfaction with supervisor or co-workers and lack of challenge to name a few. Human Resources will need to interview every employee who decides to leave the police department to adequately evaluate and make changes involving recruitment and retention programs. So when the questions, “where will the next generation of police officers come from?” And “how do we attract and keep the most desirable candidates?” are asked, there will be answers.

These current methods, word of mouth and newspaper ads, cannot remain the only means of recruiting by small departments. This research seems to confirm that the challenge is to make police work and a position within our departments a more attractive career option to a culturally diverse group in order to be competitive in the job market and attract quality, long-term employees.

FINDINGS

A survey by this writer of the Schertz Police Department was conducted. The first question asked by this survey was how the employee heard about the current job. When asked about recruiting efforts most said that they heard of their present job through a friend or fellow officer and the about a third indicated they had seen an ad in the newspaper (see Chart 1). Of the other small agencies surveyed (LEMIT Class #54) none had recruiters and half said they answered newspaper ads or learned of their present job through friends. Minority recruitment was questioned and less than half said that their agency did aggressively recruit for minorities. Schertz has only recently appointed a

recruiter so it is unknown if this will be an effective tool in enticing qualified candidates or minorities. The remaining surveys consisted of four medium agencies and six large agencies.

The second question of importance in the survey was why the officer chose Schertz as their department. The two top answers were reputation and location (see Chart 2). Other responses indicated that the officer put in applications in several agencies, wanted to work for a small department only, was looking for benefits and a chance for advancement, or this was the first job they took when they got out of the academy. This indicates that money is not always the top priority for a candidate.

It is evident to a growing number of law enforcement agencies that recruiting is becoming more difficult and should be a priority. Smaller agencies must review their current policies for hiring. With the shortage of qualified applicants plaguing most departments, police executives must define the vision or goals of their police departments and implement changes to entice the right candidates to work for their agencies. To attract those persons, small agencies must find unique strategies that appeal to all sexes, ages and cultures. It is also a good idea to look at the issues that would affect officers and their families such as childcare, promotions, benefit packages, reputation of the department and work climate.

Simply appointing a recruiter will not bring a steady stream of qualified applicants begging for a job. Training for the person(s) assigned to the recruiting task must take place first. In this area the Human Resources department will be a great help along with administrative personnel in the police department. Bottom line is that you want to attract and keep good officers.

CONCLUSIONS

While law enforcement will be held accountable, as never before for both departmental actions and use of critical resources, agencies will need to do more to prepare for the future. They can properly select, place and train employees and ensure their success through appropriate job assignment, good organizational structure, senior leadership involvement, and an emphasis on strong ethical and family values. Agency administrators must study what their community and department has to offer and then work with City administration and human resources to enhance their recruiting process. The hiring process may be too lengthy and selection procedures may need to be streamlined. Agencies must look at their successes and failures in recruitment and retention. By properly identifying problems and enacting change departments can address the issues and find valuable solutions benefiting both employer and employee. Small agencies cannot sit by and wait. Things will only get worse and the need for officers is already critical in some areas. Agency administrators must look at optional hiring practices, flexible scheduling, cross training, recruiters, monetary options and joining with other small agency administrators to brain storm on an answer to this increasing problem. Some agencies have even lowered standards for hiring officers. The State of New Mexico released a story in their Albuquerque Tribune newspaper (March 2004) that persons interested in a law enforcement career are eligible to apply as long as they have not done drugs in the last two years. Most Texas departments that this writer spoke with feel that this is not an option. Lowering standards will result in less qualified and

desirable candidates applying for a profession built on trust and honor. The public we serve will not agree with this type of recruiting effort.

This writer's department has only recently appointed a recruiter and designed a recruitment brochure. It is unknown at this time if these methods will increase an interest in the department and add to our dwindling applicant pool. Administration realizes there is a fierce competition for police personnel. Citizen police academies and Explorer/Cadet programs have not been helpful in recruiting future officers, but those programs are successful in community relations for the department. Schertz is exploring new ways to promote interest and the desired results.

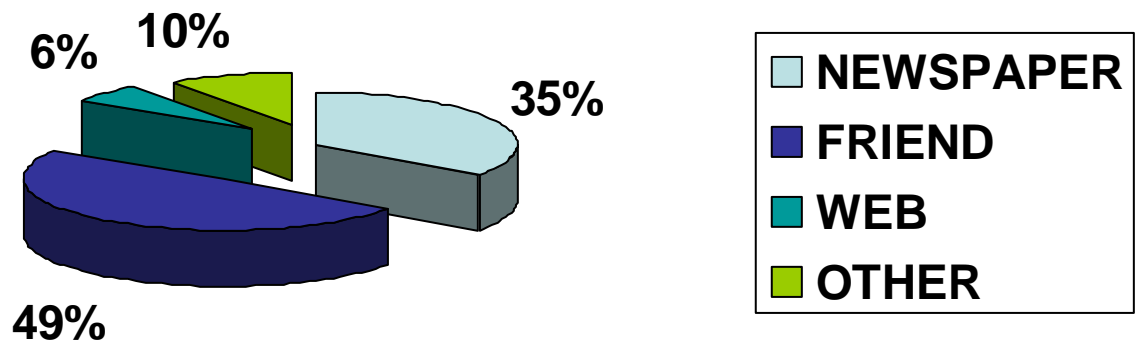
There is not a definitive answer to the recruitment and retention crisis. What works in some areas may not be effective in others. Departments must take a lesson from the Marine Corp and "improvise, adapt and overcome". But through collaborative efforts, innovative ideas, and effective communications and understanding, smaller law enforcement agencies will be able to effectively gain ground on answering the question, "where will the next generation of officers come from?"

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Appendix A

How did you hear about current job?



Appendix B

Why was this department chosen?

