

**The Bill Blackwood
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Early Warning Systems

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ABSTRACT

Early warning systems are relevant to contemporary law enforcement because with proper implementation and administration, departments will be able to decrease their civil liability by handling potential problem employees before they become a problem. The purpose of this research is to show that there is a need for early warning systems in the law enforcement environment today. Also, there are benefits for departments that monitor their employees by reducing the amount of problems they will experience. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: reviews of periodicals, internet research, journals, and various other sources.

The researcher discovered that while early warning systems are available and are being utilized, the main implementers and users are larger departments. There is a limited amount of research done on these programs, but they are considered useful when properly implemented and managed. Any department can utilize an early warning system to help reduce potential litigation resulting from a failure to locate problem employees.

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INTRODUCTION

In society today, there is a call for a higher amount of accountability for police officers and departments relating to problem employees. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) (1999) stated that “agencies seeking accreditation must have a written policy detailing their personnel early warning system” (Standard 35.1.15). The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not departments are open to civil and criminal litigation by not having an early warning system in place to detect potential problem employees. Also, with the proper implementation, departments can keep better track of all employees and follow trends in behavior.

The relevance of an early warning system to law enforcement is that departments will be able to recognize problems before they happen, thus allowing for a better interaction between the department and the public. It will also benefit the officers by taking corrective measures, which will allow for longer employment and better training. An early warning system allows several different evaluation methods to find a viable solution on how to deal with officers that meet certain criteria, like problematic behavior (Alpert & Walker, 2000).

The purpose of this research is to show the benefit to departments and the public of an early warning system being implemented. With proper implementation and monitoring, there will be a better relationship with the public as well as a reduction in civil and criminal liability for departments. The general public will feel more confident that departments are actively looking for potential problems. The research question to

be examined focuses on whether or not departments are keeping themselves open to civil and criminal litigation by not instituting an early warning system.

The intended method of inquiry includes: a review of articles, internet sites, periodicals, and journals. The items reviewed included several studies done through the National Institute of Justice. They studied models and information obtained from several departments to find relevant facts supporting the need for early warning systems and their effectiveness. Walker, Alpert, and Kenney (2001) have done articles and studies on early warning systems and have continued to update this information in recent years.

The intended outcome or anticipated findings of the research is that by implementing an early warning system properly, departments will be able to locate and properly handle potential problematic employees as well as create a better work environment and better relations with the community. With the system properly installed and operated, the community as a whole will feel safer and have fewer concerns for “rogue” police officers. The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research or be influenced by the conclusions because there will be a reduction in civil and criminal litigation, complaints, discipline, and uses of force. It will also show that departments are actively doing something about their interaction with the community.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While reviewing the literature found for this topic, it was noticed that there is more of an emphasis on the recognition along with the need and development of an early warning program. As noted by Walker and Alpert (2004), “there is a critical need for research related to early intervention programs (as cited in Lersch, Bazley, &

Mieczkowski, 2006, p. 32). Walker and Alpert (2004) only identified one study that investigated the effectiveness of early intervention systems, and this groundbreaking study is the foundation of all the future studies completed on the topic (as cited in Lersch, Bazley, & Mieczkowski, 2006).

According to National Institute of Justice (NIJ) (2001), “an early warning system is a data-based police management tool designed to identify officers whose behavior is problematic and provide a form of intervention to that performance” (p. 1). The theory is that by early recognition of possible problematic behavior corrective measures can be taken (NIJ, 2001). Walker, Alpert, & Kenney (2001) stated, “The system alerts the department to these individuals and warns the officers while providing counseling or training to help them change their problematic behavior” (p. 1).

While there is a need for the monitoring of data there might be differences between the data collected between smaller and larger agencies. Walker, Alpert, & Kenney (2001) found that “Early warning systems have three basic phases: selection, intervention, and post intervention monitoring” (p. 2). Another purpose of an early warning system is to help prevent bad behavior before it happens due to employees knowing that the system is place (Walker, Alpert, & Kenney, 2001).

The development of an early warning system can help to reduce the civil and criminal litigation that could be faced if no system was in place. According to CALEA (1999), “a comprehensive Personnel Early Warning System is an essential component of good discipline in a well-managed law enforcement agency” (Standard 35.1.15). By identifying problem officers early and correcting the behaviors, agencies can increase their accountability and offer the officers the change to coincide with an agency's mission statement and values. Andre and Hughes (2007) wrote that “A growing

number of researchers have indicated that approximately 10% of police officers can cause, or have caused, 90% of the problems in law enforcement agencies” (p. 164).

There has been some discussion regarding how stringent the standards should be so that the potential problematic employee is recognized much sooner to alleviate any potential threats to the public or department. Andre and Hughes (2007) stated that “for an early warning system or EWS to be effective at all, the system must first properly identify the appropriate variables that are causing problems for the agency” (p. 164). They also believed that the “variables may differ for individual police agencies based on their personnel, range of services offered, and community demographics” (Andre & Hughes, 2007, p. 164) This researcher has not found any case studies with a set standard of indicators to focus on for evaluation. This allows individual agencies the opportunity to adjust the levels as they see fit. Early warning systems have several criteria they can take into account to include: citizen complaints, use of force incidents, resisting arrest incidents, assaults on officer, interfering with officer charges, disorderly conduct charges, insubordination, and sick time usage.

While using certain criteria to be an indicator of a potential problem employee, a department should look at the grander scheme of things to determine possible employee review (Walker & Alpert, 2004). One officer could show indicators of potential problem behavior but only due to the higher levels of work output that result in a higher amount of complaints. Another employee could have a lower level of work output but the level of complaints could show that in relation to the output there is a greater risk to monitor. By looking at all aspects, not just numbers, there would be an overall picture (Walker & Alpert, 2004).

The majority of relevant information, surveys and data derived from Miami-Dade PD, Minneapolis PD, and New Orleans PD, in conjunction with the National Institute of Justice, on this topic stems from larger departments that have a larger collection of employees (Walker, Alpert, & Kenney, 2001). With the larger amount of staffing, they have more employees to supervise, so the criterion of their early warning system seems to include more than smaller agencies. Smaller agencies might not have as much criteria as they have a more one on one interaction with employees and could feel as though they are better able to identify problematic issues. While there is closer interaction between employees, it should not prevent smaller agencies from adopting an early warning system. With the closer interaction, there is a chance that potential problematic behavior will be dismissed or overlooked because of that relationship.

While instituting an early warning system is an extreme benefit in the litigious society that is lived in today, it will not succeed without the proper management to ensure a complete and thorough process of indicated employees. An article by Andre and Hughes (2007) advised that “a poorly managed EWS can also generate feelings of hostility and cynicism among the officers to the point that it harms the agency as a whole. EWS’s are, therefore, high-maintenance programs that require ongoing administrative attention” (Andre & Hughes, 2007, p. 170).

A study undertaken by Walker, Alpert, and Kenney (2001) in conjunction with the Police Executive Research Forum found that the EWS system has a potential significant effect on supervisors also. They stated, “an intervention program communicates to supervisors their responsibility to monitor officers who have been identified by the program...It also gives supervisors relevant information about officers who are newly assigned to them...” (Walker, Alpert, & Kenney, 2001, pp. 4-5).

With a department adopting an early warning program, they are showing that they are dedicated to protecting the officers in their department and also the community as a whole by monitoring employee's behavior. In the event that a potential lawsuit is brought against a department or officer, they will be able to show that there is a monitoring program in place, and they took a proactive approach to monitor their employees. It should also be remembered that this program is a tool, and the agency needs to make it specific for them and aggressively monitor the employees even after they have activated the system and receive training or other prescribed corrective action garnered through the process.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not early warning systems are applicable to police departments and if they will offer any value as an effective tool to determine possible problematic employees before they become an issue. The purpose of this research was to show that with a properly installed and monitored early warning system, police departments can and will reduce civil liability. The research question that was examined focused on whether properly implementing and monitoring an early warning system will help the police department reduce civil liability and will allow for better community relations.

The researcher hypothesized that when an early warning system is installed and in place, the monitoring will show trends that can and will be addressed to reduce the likelihood of problematic employees. The researcher concluded from the findings that with a properly installed and monitored early warning system, there will be a reduction in problematic employees, which will result in a better relationship with the community and

a reduction in civil liability for the police department. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the employees and the community knowing that a system of checks and balances is in place that will detect potential problematic employees before they have an issue. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because there are few departments that have investigated this process and few that will report the data. The early warning system program can concern some departments with the probability of a problem employee being found.

The study of early warning systems is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because with the ever-changing environment lived in today; there is a higher call for proper behavior in law enforcement. Communities want and demand a higher standard for police departments, and departments should do everything possible to show that the proper steps are being taken to live up to that higher standard. Law enforcement and society stands to benefit from the results of this research by showing that with proper implementation and monitoring, there will be a stronger belief in law enforcement holding a higher standard and taking a proactive stance toward problematic employees.

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