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Term Limits for Specialized Units

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ABSTRACT

Police departments around the world have specialized units with officers who have received advanced investigative and technical training. The size of the department does not matter; these units are essential to the department's survival. This paper will address the issue of the police personnel assigned to a specialty position for an extended period and how this extended stay hinders their professional growth and prevents other personnel from the opportunity to benefit from a specialty assignment.

This is relevant to law enforcement because officers often stagnate in one position, which lowers their morale and allows for complacency (Bean, 2009). An agency with a sound rotational system will create opportunities for officers to advance their career and build a well-rounded agency. Limiting police corruption is an enormous undertaking but rotating personnel can result in significant reduction of its footprint in the department, thereby allowing transparency. The periodic rotation of officers in specialized units will keep those unethical officers, in that environment, from developing an attitude of being above the law. Term limits can help prevent police officers from becoming stagnant and/or experiencing "burnout" in the agency. A change in job duties equals new experiences, challenges, and dimensions, which can serve to motivate those on the road to burnout.

Rotating the personnel will stimulate the organization with new ideas and provide officers with a wide range of knowledge and skill throughout the department. With a strong rotational policy, the department will benefit from a more motivated group of officers, energized to serve the citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

Police departments around the world have specialized units with officers who have received advanced investigative and technical training. The size of the department does not matter; these units are essential to the department's survival. This paper will address the issue of the police personnel assigned to a specialty position for an extended period and how this extended stay hinders their professional growth and prevents other personnel from the opportunity to benefit from a specialty assignment.

This is relevant to law enforcement because officers often stagnate in one position, lowering their morale and allowing for complacency (Bean, 2009). These factors cause elitism to creep into the specialized units and division within the agency. An agency with a sound rotational system will create opportunities for officers to advance their career and build a well-rounded agency.

Patrol officers are normally the first responders to an incident, and the officers with advanced training would ensure a systemic and proper initiation of the investigation. When officers complete their specialized assignments, they should return to the patrol in order to fill the vacancies created by the rotations. This rotational style will build a more mature and experienced patrol force that understands the importance of a complete and thorough investigation. An experienced patrol section should decrease the number of complaints and errors occurring during investigations (Gabor, 1992).

The purpose of this white paper is to propose term limits in specialty positions at law enforcement agencies to allow for professional growth. Term limits will allow increased number of police personnel to experience specialized fields within the

agency. A term limit policy will prevent the police personnel from becoming stagnant and complacent in a specialty unit within the agency. Other benefits discussed in this paper include are how term limits will allow transparency within the police agencies and boosted morale.

POSITION

Term limits of the personnel assigned to specialized units will allow for transparency within police agencies. The term transparent as defined by the *Oxford Dictionaries* is “open to public scrutiny” (Transparent, n.d., def. 2.2). Transparency in police agencies would limit misconduct. There have been many agencies in varying sizes that have dealt with misconduct in specialized units. These agencies range from the Los Angeles Police Department corruption scandal in the Rampart division in the late nineties to the Fort Worth Police Department’s citation scandal in 2014. This misconduct can range from illegal traffic stops to planting evidence to taking bribes. Though the misconduct will never be eliminated, rotating officers will limit the impact. Per McNamara (1975) stated, “an awareness of the potential danger of corruption led to the formation of a wise policy of rotation of assignments in positions sensitive to corruption” (p. 44). The Los Angeles Police Department learned the importance of personnel rotation from a highly-publicized corruption scandal of one of their specialized units. The Board of Inquiry’s Public Report into the Rampart Area corruption incident suggested to LAPD that officers spend several tours on patrol during their law enforcement career, after leaving a specialized unit (Parks, 2000).

Limiting police corruption is an enormous undertaking but rotating personnel can result in significant reduction in its footprint on the department, thereby allowing

transparency. Barker (1977) stated “issues inherent to the nature of police work itself are conducive to corruption. One such factor is the proximity to crime and deviant actors that police officers are exposed to. This proximity to crime leads to temptation” (p. 354). The periodic rotation of officers in specialized units will keep those unethical officers, in that environment, from developing the attitude of being above the law. Once an agency has integrated and established the belief that any police officer is indispensable and so essential that the agency could not function effectively without that officer, it sets up the agency and the officer up for failure. Souryal (1979) argued that police corruption can be traced to personality deficiencies in individual officers, specifically naming human weaknesses such as overzealousness, temptation, and cynicism as some of these causes. It is essential to rotate officers to avoid corruption. Wood (2000) stated that “knowing what corruption is and the generalized way of how it begins, the next step is to stop it” (p. 3). However, law enforcement organizations must initially identify and accept the reality of exposure to the corruption of the officers, before establishing meaningful strategies. A rotational policy, as stated by Gabor (1992), “...immediately eliminates stagnation, elitism, and undesirable cliques, all of which limit the effectiveness of the department, as well as the ability of the department to respond to change” (p. 2). The value of the department’s overall efficiency and effectiveness is impacted by experienced officers, who have obtained a high level of expertise in specialized assignments, rotating to patrol or other specialized units. The movement of these experienced officers throughout the department will reduce the temptation to become complacent, which can lead to officers taking shortcuts.

Career development in municipal policing study shows that officers entering law enforcement with expectations of working specialized assignments such as criminal investigations are motivated to perform the best job possible. When these officers are kept devoid of opportunities to pursue these goals, it often leads to job burnouts, officers seeking employment elsewhere, drinking, family problems, and a lack of commitment to the department (McGinnis, 1985). Term limits can help prevent police officers from becoming stagnant and/or experience “burnout” in the agency. Burnout is defined by the *Oxford Dictionaries* as, “physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress” (Burnout, n.d., def. 3). According to Dr. Beverly Potter (2005), the social service field has a higher chance of burnout which leaves a person emotionally exhausted. Over time this will lead a person to have a decreasing rate of enjoyment of the job and in some cases, eliminate the sense of accomplishment. Burnout is highly prevalent in the law enforcement field because of the high-stress work environment and emotional demands. One popular way to halt the spread of burnout is to vary the assignment allocation to the officers. A change in job duties equals new experiences, challenges, and dimensions, which can serve to motivate those on the road to burnout. However, a change in job assignment does not equal adding more work to existing job duties.

Most officers gain useful knowledge from working the specialty assignments but some officers also develop bad habits because they are burned out from being on one assignment for many years. Per Gabor (1992) stated that these undesirable traits include laziness due to lack of interest or variety or tunnel vision. Gabor (1992) went on to state, “Leaving employees in the same assignment for extended periods of time also promotes elitism or cliques within specialized groups” (p. 1). These cliques are unwilling

to change or adjust to fresh ideas and are likely to persevere the old tried-and-true traditional methods. Waters and Ussery (2007) confirmed that officer burnout must be dealt with proactively not reactively. They believe a lack of proactive address of the officer burnout issue will only aggravate the issue, and further contribute to adversely affecting issues in the officer's home, such as relationship issues, drugs and/or alcohol, and even family violence.

Job performance is also affected by burnout. It leads to lower productivity, carelessness, and missed work time. Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to cynicism and detachment. This will eventually lead an officer to feel ineffective and believe that they have not accomplished anything. Along with the loss of productivity, there is also the loss of enjoyment in the work, making them always ready to leave or towards excessive abuse use in their daily lives. Burnout can also lead to employee turnover and with a resultant increase in training costs of new officers, this becomes an economic burden to agencies (Carter, 2013).

To prevent burnout and loss of excellent officers that are bored, each police department should have a sound rotational system. Most patrol officers are awaiting their opportunity to serve in specialized assignments, such as Criminal Investigation Division, or Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT). These officers are like sponges waiting to absorb new experiences. Likewise, officers in specialized units should also be rotated to prevent them from becoming indispensable. Rotating personnel on a regular basis gives employees a well-rounded view of the department's overall operation and limits the organizational problems caused by leaving employees in one position for long periods of time (Gabor, 1992).

Term limits will allow more police officers to rotate and experience specialized fields within the police agency. Morrison & Hock (1986) stated that “job rotation is a practice that allows an employee to move laterally between divisions or units within an organization, thereby allowing employee on-the-job training and experience in a variety of areas, without a change in rank or employment status” (p. 241). Allowing officers to rotate through different units increases their knowledge of policing and depending on the unit, how the department functions. A by-product of rotation is that it prepares the officers for the next progressive step in their career, such as promotion.

A study conducted in a Canadian municipal police department found that the critical need for career development through job rotation occurs between an officers' fifth and eleventh year of service (McGinnis, 1985). Oxford defined the practice of moving employees between different tasks to promote experience and variety as job rotation (Job rotation, n.d., def. 1). Job rotation should be viewed as a tool to develop an employee's professional skills. The benefits of rotation of employees in specialized units out weights the downtime spent on training a replacement. Gabor (1992) suggests that rotation of personnel “enhances the employees' understanding of the overall operation of the department. This, in turn, gives officers a greater sense of confidence and knowledge about law enforcement management...” (p. 17). Rotating employees that have been in law enforcement for a long time helps to expand the employee's knowledge of how the agency operates.

By allowing officers to cross-train within the police department, the leaders of the agency proactively foster the leaders of tomorrow. Personnel rotation can also stimulate cross-training of police officers. Cross-training is useful to supervisors

because it results in increased adaptability ability of personnel to the task. It allows supervisors to utilize skill that officers have learned in other special assignments to efficiently manage the immediate task while waiting for those specialized units to become available. Cross-training is beneficial to both supervisors and employees because of the knowledge base that is gained, which also increases their value within the organization. Reh (2016) stated that “key benefits of cross-training include improved employee awareness of organization's roles and functions, and the ability to keep employees motivated and "fresh" through assignment rotation...” (para. 4).

Officers that get promoted to a supervisor position after functioning in one assignment for an extended period of time have a greater learning curve compared to those officers who have cross-trained throughout the agency. These new supervisors must overcome the limited view on the operations and functioning of the department. They should work harder to improve awareness of how their roles fit in with other functions thought-out the organization, which they have not experienced. This is why it is critical that agencies train their future leaders to build a wide functional knowledge base by cross-training. According to Whitaker (1980), the goal of police organizations is the renewal of the police organizations from within, “the ultimate objective of police revitalization is ... the capacity of self-renewal” (p. 61).

COUNTER POSITION

Several critics believe that term limits would lower morale and cause division in the department. They believe rotation would undermine units such as Criminal Investigation, by robbing it of investigative experience and knowledge. According to Geberth (1998) “criminal investigation requires specialized skills and training” (p. 194).

Specialized units, such as Homicide, would be an exception where the officer may not rotate as frequent as other units because of the skill required. Critics also point to the fact that transferring these experienced investigators back to patrol is considered demoralizing to the officer and counterproductive to the professional investigative process. These officers are disheartened and therefore, don't want to leave their investigative assignment.

However, a rotation system will benefit both the department and the officer. Rotating personnel will stimulate the organization with new ideas. Above all, it will give the officer a much broader understanding of the overall operation of the agency. Anthony V. Bouza (1978), Chief of Police for Minneapolis, Minnesota wrote that "police officers should be afforded maximum mobility possibilities with the widest possible latitude in order to develop a sense of having a measure of control over their own fate" (p. 110). The experience and knowledge thus, do not leave the department but are distributed throughout the organization. Experiences that officers' gain from rotating to different assignments, contributes to their individual growth and enables them to make knowledgeable decisions daily. Once these officers have been rotated to patrol or even to other assignments, they are able to share their skills and knowledge with other officers when responding to major incidents.

There are members of the law enforcement community that believe that term limits or rotating personnel from special units would lower morale within the agency. Geberth (1998) stated that "periodically transferring these experienced investigators back to patrol is not only demoralizing to the members of the agency but is counterproductive to the professional investigative process." Geberth (1998) further

states that “officers who are to be rotated out become disheartened and don't want to leave their investigative assignment.”

Another popular disagreement to the rotation is that morale inside the agency will decrease with the transfer of officers from a specialty unit. However, Tim Gabor (1992) indicated in his research, “An organizationally sound rotation system will produce high morale, good interdepartmental relations, new ideas, and a stronger team” (p. 1). Thus, morale problems are not new issues to police agencies. Agencies are always looking for ways to improve the morale of the department. When officers are rotated, they have more options and chances for growth in police work which leads to a more fulfilling career. According to Gocke (1945), officers “... must believe in the cause for which they are working, in the plans or procedures being used, and in the possibility of achieving some success” (para. 11).

RECOMMENDATION

As stated, the purpose of this white paper on term limits is not to penalize excellent officers in specialty position but to suggest term limits in an effort to allow professional growth and to enhance the professionalism of the agency. Each agency should make a conscious effort to disperse these officers with this knowledge gained in these specialty positions throughout the agency. Term limits will allow more police personnel to experience different and specialized fields within the agency ensuring that well-trained and motivated officers are answering calls for service in the field. Perry (2001) wrote that when an officer reaches “... the midpoint in an officer's career can present a danger zone for malaise, resentment, cynicism or just plain boredom” (para. 9).

A strong term limit policy will prevent police personnel from becoming stagnant and complacent. It is a proven fact that humans seek challenges. According to Rabideau (2005), "Achievement goals can affect the way a person performs a task and represent a desire to show competence" (para. 2). Another benefit that was discussed is that term limits will allow transparency within the specialty units. The periodic rotation of officers will reduce the chances of officers developing unethical behavior and an attitude that they are elite and above the law. This elitism attitude fuels corruption. A police officer is the most valuable resource in a department and should be utilized in the most efficient and effective manner possible. The answer to preventing corruption and rising morale is frequent assignment rotation.

Several critics believe that term limits would lower morale and cause division in the department. They believe that mandatory assignment change is not effective management of personnel and is a morale deflator. The involuntary transfer of motivated officers may cause unneeded stress, frustration, and undermine the effectiveness of the unit. However, sound rotation system will benefit both the department and the officers by raising morale. Rotating personnel will stimulate the organization with new ideas and provide officers with a wide range of knowledge and skill thought-out the department.

The purpose of this white paper was to propose the establishment of term limits within law enforcement agencies in specialty positions to allow for professional growth. A recommendation would be to endorse a mandatory rotations policy that transfers personnel from a specialty unit into a patrol or into another specialty unit every five to seven years depending on the needs of that unit. Management should also ensure that

all members of the organization understand the importance of the rotation policy. It is very important that when the rotation starts, that agency rotates the most senior officer first, the officer that has been in that position for at least the minimum years. As Tom Gabor (1992) discussed, a sound rotational system will change the appearance of the agency. He stated that it will bring in, "high morale, a clear understanding of the common mission, efficiency, harmony between bureaus and sections, and fresh ideas" (p. 17).

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