

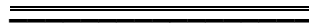
**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Collaboration Efforts by Regional Police Agencies**



**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Law enforcement agencies in today's day and age face numerous challenges in accomplishing their mission of serving the public. Among these challenges are financial burdens to departmental budgets, equipment needs, poor project management, ineffective communication, and a lack of cooperation on public safety based programs. Law enforcement agencies that effectively collaborate by forming specialized teams often find they can do more good for their respective community verses going alone. When examining this model some departments tend to be afraid of several factors, which include encountering resistance to collaboration efforts by the rank and file police officers of the agencies that employ them. In addition, the municipalities overseeing these agencies often fear losing control of their local police departments, especially when the idea of collaboration is new to their geographic region. This is especially true among the smaller agencies in the United States. However, police departments in numerous communities have found great success by collaborating their resources on specialized teams. An analysis of this theory has shown that law enforcement agencies who collaborate make better arguments for serving the public and their safety needs.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are over 17,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States (Reaves, 2007). While this number encompasses the entire country, from small towns in rural America to the largest metropolitan centers (and everything in between), the fact remains that there are a substantial quantity of police agencies doing their own thing in terms of funding, equipment, and efforts to reduce crime. They all work towards the same general goal of providing for the safety of their communities by investigating crime and preventing harm to members of the public.

While the sheer number of agencies causes law enforcement services to splinter among different police organizations, what can easily be lost in the mix is the option of interagency cooperation among regional police departments. In many metropolitan areas, there are cities whose boundaries are nearly impossible to distinguish between because of urban growth. Where one city ends, another begins, with the only indicators being a change in the design and style of the local street signs. Likewise, in rural communities, there are often smaller towns or cities spread out, with the majority of the law enforcement needs being serviced within the jurisdiction of the local sheriff's department (or parish, borough, or commonwealth for that matter, depending on what state they find themselves in). Furthermore, federal law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have jurisdiction in every state, where applicable, and often rely heavily on the local law enforcement agencies within a respective region to accomplish their objectives as well.

With the large quantity of many thousands of law enforcement organizations, inevitably attached to their daily operations are a host of different budgets (the jail

budget, vs. the patrol budget, for example), strategic plans (both long term and short term), department visions, different standards of equipment, and a myriad of crime reduction projects. To complicate matters more, a large communication gap can occur, not just within an organization, but between an agency and the agencies that border it. These barriers can be cumbersome to navigate. It can be made much more difficult by the local, employing governments that control so much of what occurs within a police organization, such as a city council's control over a police chief's departmental budget. Outside influences, such as that wielded by the positive or negative coverage from the media, can challenge the police on issues. It can also have a lasting effect, positive or negative, on the direction of a department. Departments must accommodate for these types of challenges which can be reflected in a department's five year strategic plan for serving the needs of the public.

Key to public safety needs is getting police organizations back to the basics of solving the crime problems of its local jurisdiction. With so many complicated barriers in place, it becomes vital that an organization recognize, and at least explore, one of the most simplified principles of working among the 17,000 different law enforcement agencies in the United States. Regional police agencies should collaborate their resources on specialized teams.

By collaborating their resources on specialized teams, police agencies will be able to make better use of department budgets. Those that control a budget in a city, county, parish, borough, or even at the state and federal level, can reap the financial benefits of combining resources in terms of staffing and equipment. Law enforcement agencies can also share equipment to produce better crime reduction results, being that

there will not be duplication of equipment purchases. Collaboration on projects will allow police organizations to target crime ridden neighborhoods together, regardless of a specific city, which again allows for the use of resources and expertise to solve complex crime control problems. Perhaps the greatest benefit is the increased communication between police jurisdictions. By allowing regional police agencies to talk in a free flow method of communication, a good working relationship will be fostered to increase the solvability factor of crimes afflicting the public.

There are obstacles to law enforcement collaboration of resources on specialized teams. There will inevitably be a power struggle between some members of the municipalities, specifically due to the fear of losing control of local police departments as solid working relationships begin between jurisdictions. Among the law enforcement communities, the likelihood of ego problems among the rank and file officers will exist until those issues are addressed head on and resolved. However, the benefits of allowing regional police agencies to collaborate their resources on specialized teams will far outweigh the negatives of continuing the path alone.

## **POSITION**

Operating a law enforcement agency costs money. Tax payers are expecting quality public safety services for the money they pay every year. Public safety costs, which includes both police and fire combined, place more burden on the financial resources from local government organizations than any other service besides education (Wilson & Grammich, 2016, p. 39). Because of this, the theory behind consolidating police services with other local jurisdictions has been implemented numerous times in the past. According to Nelligan & Bourns (2011, p. 87) consolidating

police services was heavily utilized in Los Angeles County during the 1940s and 1950s (as cited in Bedillion, 2016, p. 1). It is important to note that this type of consolidation was a combination of actual police forces from cities that contracted their police services entirely with the sheriff's department. While this type of consolidation does work for some agencies, the biggest worry is that participating cities hand control of their entire police department function over to the sheriff's department. This paper does not advocate that, instead it explores the possibilities of combining specialized units within police agencies to show the best possible results for the participants involved.

Collaborating on specialized teams can be a better use of department budgets. SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams are an excellent example of this. Recently in Massachusetts, local governments performed a SWAT cost analysis. They quickly came to the determination that the ability to save money on their budgets was real, especially when making a bid for federal grants to support their regional SWAT team efforts (Balko, 2017).

While some might consider this concept more in depth than simplified specialized teams, it is worth noting that combined dispatch centers have proven effective in reducing operating costs for police departments. In December 2009, Cleveland State University completed a feasibility study for a combined dispatch center whose purpose was to serve fourteen suburb cities in the greater Cleveland, Ohio region (Shimik, Foster, & Cooper, 2009). The feasibility study determined that these cities were collaborating their resources on numerous projects already, and forming a partnership in terms of a combined dispatch center was a natural step in the right direction. They established a narrative of determining whether the cities who participated in the project

would receive service that is comparative to what they already have, but at a lower cost (Shimik et al., 2009). This is the question that every police department should analyze for themselves when they embark on collaboration projects, whether large, or in the form of smaller specialized units. Cleveland State University determined that its dispatch collaboration effort would reduce operating costs by \$1.64 million (Shimik et al., 2009).

Collaborating on specialized teams with regional law enforcement agencies can foster better attempts to reduce crime in the cities that participate. The *American Journal of Evaluation* performed a study in 2009 to measure the development of interagency collaboration, with the primary focus being on the “importance of interagency collaboration for improving community well-being, environmental and public health, and educational outcomes” (Cross, Dickmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Fagan, 2009, p. 310). The spotlight of the research in this article was on the importance that different sources of funding have placed on interagency collaboration. Law enforcement is prominently included in this matrix. Kadushin, Lindholm, Ryan, & Sax, (2005), established through extensive research that collaboration among interagency operatives are actually the most productive when specialized unit size is small, and when they are comprised of goal focused individuals (as cited in Cross et. al, 2009). This study provided the research of the benefits of regional police agencies collaborating their resources on specialized teams with a robust, scientific approach and results.

At the heart of any regional police collaboration effort for specialized teams is the ability of a team to communicate. Specialized teams produce better communication



between the law enforcement organizations employing them. One form of a proven collaboration effort among police departments are narcotic task forces. High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) were created in 1988 by Congress, with the passing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 (DEA, n.d.). Their purpose was to combine the efforts of law enforcement agencies (federal to the local level) in areas deemed to be at risk of high narcotics trafficking. There are currently 28 regions in the United States with HIDTA designation (DEA, n.d.). These drug task forces allow local, state, and federal law enforcement officers to work side by side in a collaboration effort to combat narcotics trafficking.

Communication is key in these task forces. Frantzen & Can (2009) established that there is a multidimensional approach to understanding task forces. In a literature review assessing HIDTA effectiveness, McGarrell & Schlegel (1993) cite that a “process-centered approach emphasizes the relationships among the agencies that make up the task force. Further, it stresses the importance of certain factors such as communication, cooperation, and resource management for productivity purposes” (as cited by Frantzen & Can, 2009, p.25).

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

Forming a specialized team comprised of regional police agencies may be met with resistance among the rank and file officers. Police agencies, as with any group of people working closely together, tend to form their own department cultures, often which carries through an entire employing entity, such as a city or a county employer. This type of close working environment tends to insulate law enforcement agencies and leads to resistance when considering a collaboration effort with another regional police

department. It is well documented by Russell-Einhorn et al. (2004) that an uncoordinated effort creates undue rigidity between all agencies involved (as cited by Schnobrich-Davis & Terrill, 2010). Perhaps even more effective at illustrating this point is an anonymous quote from a Minnesota director of public safety, in which he stated, "Police officers like being the main event, so there can be an ego clash. Firefighters may perceive police as prima donnas. It took us months to hit that head-on. Sometimes police would refuse to integrate into the scene" (as cited by Wilson, Weiss & Grammich, 2016, p. 40). The Minnesota director of public safety was part of a study to examine the feasibility of combining police and fire departments into a department of public safety.

Law enforcement officers are typically "take charge" individuals which is easy to understand when considering the nature of their job assignment. Overall, they are also a prideful type of individual with a competitive nature. This type of attitude can make it awkward when forming a specialized team comprised of regional departments. Egos have a habit of creeping into any work environment, and law enforcement is no exception. Russell-Einhorn et al. (2004) found that law enforcement functions allowing officers to work independently tend to find problems in work duplication and a lack of activity coordination, leading to "dangerous collisions of personnel" and increasing the likelihood of grievances by officers (as cited by Schnobrich-Davis & Terrill, 2010).

However, collaboration efforts when forming specialized teams have already proven to work. Specialized teams have existed for years and are only becoming more prevalent. Understanding human nature and how people work together translates to law enforcement as well. Team building exercises, addressing complaints immediately

as a group, placing all members of the team in the same uniform (such as within a regional SWAT team), all establish uniformity as a group. By utilizing the HIDTA model (regional drug task forces), morale and communication between the different agency members has proven to increase productivity in terms of drug seizures and numbers of arrests (Frantzen & Can, 2009).

Municipalities sometimes fear losing control over their police departments in regards to collaborating on specialized teams with neighboring agencies. The idea of a city having complete control over its police force is steeped in a deep history, dating back to the 1800s when local governments feared state government oppression against their local control (Schnobrich-Davis, 2016, p.24). The argument against this theory can easily be made when considering the sheer volume of police agencies in the United States. The splintering of police services leads to “duplications of effort, fragmentation of authority, and fiscal inequities” (Schnobrich-Davis, 2016, p. 25). By collaborating on specialized teams, local municipalities are not losing control, but actually expanding their capabilities in terms of response to incidents, and as a side benefit, offering more opportunities for professional growth to their police officers. This is especially true for the smaller police agencies. Specialized units do not take away from the agency, but they do supplement the professional development of its officers, leading to a better trained workforce of cops now diversified across multiple law enforcement disciplines (Schnobrich-Davis, 2016, p. 29).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Police departments within close geographical proximity should strongly consider collaborating their resources on specialized teams. The United States has over 17,000

thousand law enforcement agencies that protect the nation's populace effectively on a daily basis. Half of those 17,000 police agencies employ ten or fewer officers (Reaves, 2007). An agency of fewer than ten officers is an excellent candidate for collaboration of resources on specialized teams.

Specialized teams do not have to be complicated. A regional, specialized team can be comprised of a few officers from surrounding agencies that simply band together to accomplish a law enforcement objective. Examples of specialized teams include riot response teams (in the form of Mobile Field Force teams, or MFF), narcotics teams, SWAT teams, accident reconstruction teams, hostage negotiation teams, street crimes units and deployment teams. Their focus is usually a specific law enforcement objective, such as catching car burglars that are striking in a geographical region. For example a street crimes unit or a burglary detail can be formed by two or more regional agencies with the goal of preventing home burglaries in a particular region of a participating city.

A more complicated collaboration of a specialized unit is the formation of a SWAT team. SWAT teams require significantly more time, money, staffing and commitment by participating agencies. While SWAT teams carry with them these burdens, they are cost effective in the long run. They also function more smoothly with proper memorandums of understanding between participating agencies. The collaboration effort can be taken even further than SWAT teams, by discussing the formation of regional dispatch centers. Agencies have established time and again the financial benefits of consolidating dispatch centers. These efforts have proven to lower

costs and to improve the law enforcement mission of providing public safety services to the communities they serve.

Collaborating resources on specialized teams is a better use of police department budgets. Budgets are typically stretched thin annually as it is. Sharing resources does not require an agency to shoulder the burden alone. It instead spreads the costs among the participating agencies so that each agency produces a portion of the equipment, funding, and staffing to accomplish the collaboration objective. Federal grants are also more readily available to agencies who collaborate together, such as on the formation of a regional SWAT team (Balko, 2017).

Law enforcement agencies that combine their resources on specialized teams work better on collaboration efforts. Academic research supports this claim. There is ample evidence to show that interagency collaboration, when done correctly, is beneficial to participating agencies (Cross et al., 2009). Better communication between law enforcement agencies is a side benefit to agency collaboration, as well as a requirement to their effectiveness. McGarrell & Schlegel (1993) found that HIDTA task forces rely heavily on this aspect; in fact, their effectiveness is based primarily on the communication capabilities between participating entities of the federal, state, and local agencies (as cited by Frantzen & Can, 2009).

There is, however, some opposition to allowing regional police agencies to collaborate their resources on specialized teams. These arguments tend to be because of the perceived resistance by rank and file officers of having to work with outside organizations, or because of a municipality's fear of losing control of its police departments as they collaborate resources to accomplish the law enforcement

objective. These concerns, while valid, are for the most part baseless. The “ego centric” officer fades away when it is shown the career enhancing benefits of collaborating resources (such as on a SWAT team) and the partnerships that form with neighboring agencies. Municipalities realize that they will not lose control of their law enforcement agencies, but will find their departments enriched with the benefits of a regional specialized team and the financial savings and public service benefits it will bring.

Agencies can start the process of collaborating on specialized teams in the simplest of ways. The need for the interagency collaboration must first be recognized and the communication process started. Motivated officers of a police department are often eager to volunteer for specialized assignments. A verbal agreement, or a policy development typically follows quickly after. A method of measurement to evaluate success of the collaboration rounds out the effort.

While many of the examples cited in this research range from basic to complicated, the fact remains that collaboration efforts between regional police departments are a positive for the communities they service. The benefits far outweigh the negatives in terms of interagency collaboration on specialized teams. These units can be an excellent collaboration of diverse officers from surrounding agencies teamed up to carry out the law enforcement mission in a fiscally responsible way of serving the public.

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