

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Citizen Volunteers:  
An Underutilized Resource for Law Enforcement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

American law enforcement is at a pivotal point in its history and future development. The economic crisis affecting budgeting, the re-emergence of mass civil disobedience (the Occupy movement), and the service expectations of the communities served are all overtaking law enforcement's financial ability to provide the mainstream services to the communities. As the problems indicate, the challenges facing law enforcement in current society are numerous and serious. Most importantly, the concept of throwing more money at the problem is no longer a valid option. Law enforcement must look at the communities they serve and seek to build the partnerships that will potentially define 21<sup>st</sup> century American law enforcement.

This leadership white paper documents research from government and private sector studies and journals, newspaper articles, law enforcement professional internet sites, and trade books addressing security and law enforcement management models. This research shows the benefits of involving the community within an agency such as increased citizen satisfaction and a reduction of crime within the community by addressing budget savings, auxiliary support for disaster operations, and the realization of the community policing model of law enforcement. In addition, this paper addresses the major counterpoints of staff resistance, credentialing/community safety, and whether the cost or manpower needs prevent implementation of citizen volunteer programs. A properly implemented citizen volunteer program benefits the law enforcement agency by addressing budget obstacles, increasing community satisfaction with police services, and a safer community, as seen demonstrated in disaster responses.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 2008, the United States has seen an economic recession that has drastically affected the budgets of many police departments throughout the nation. As cited by USA Today, “By year’s end, nearly 12,000 police officers will have lost their jobs, and 30,000 positions in county and municipal departments will go unfilled, both direct consequences of a faltering economy that has forced deep cuts in local government budgets” (Johnson & Jackson, 2011, p. 2A). The issue of budget has forced many police departments, at all levels of government, to look for underutilized methods in order to continue to deliver effective services, while at the same time facing the funding crisis. In light of the budget constraints, many agencies are still faced with delivering services to the communities they are sworn to protect. This paper looks to address the under-utilization of citizen volunteers in the law enforcement community and the impact these volunteers can offer.

The history of citizens volunteering in the United States, especially in law enforcement, has ebbed and flowed throughout time. A specific example cited in a study showed that participation of volunteers is “as old as English Common Law” (Ren, 2006, p. 464). Common examples are the militia volunteers during the early formation of the country and the way to the Wild West sheriff called a posse together to assist with the apprehension of outlaw bandits (Ren, 2006). These groups of people were called upon during a specific time of need to augment the regular force and accomplish a specific mission. As law enforcement professionalized throughout the centuries and specifically during the early to mid-1900s, the trend of law enforcement organizations was to use fewer and fewer citizen volunteers. Approximately 20 to 30 years ago,

professional law enforcement started to again look at the use of volunteers due to the adoption of community policing models (Cundiff, 2010) (IACP, 2005).

## **POSITION**

Whether it is the expectations formed by Hollywood movies, television shows such as the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* franchise, or the successful efforts law enforcement has itself made at becoming a resource for communities, society as a whole expects more from its law enforcement professionals (Shelton, 2008). With this belief by the citizens of the community, they expect law enforcement to deliver the services they see on television even with budget reductions imposed by the current economic recession. The whole mantra of “Do more with less” is applicable. To this end, law enforcement must look at old and new methods and evaluate whether any of these methods can assist with current constraints.

The use of citizen volunteers is one such method of doing more with less, and a program that can dramatically offset the budget constraints of the current recession. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2005) indicated in their policy paper that “Volunteers allow law enforcement agencies and officers to focus on policing and enforcement functions by providing supplemental or support services” (p. 1). Volunteers help agencies “keep officers on patrol” (p. 27) by allowing them to remain where they are needed and to address the most pressing issues facing a community (Chouinard, 2003). The use of volunteers is adaptable to the needs of the agency and frequently takes on many organizational structures or sub programs depending on the requirements of each unique jurisdiction. Examples of some of the different types of structures are the Citizen Corps programs of Community Emergency Response Team

(CERT) or Volunteers In Police Service (VIPS). Additional programs such as Citizens On Patrol (COP), Reserve or Auxiliary Police Officers or, a home grown program are also used (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2004).

During times of disasters, an example of the use of volunteers is detailed by Greenberg (2003), who stated that volunteers “answered phones, data collection and posting, and surveying and reporting damage to property” (p. 32). Depending on local policies, CERT members are also trained on the disaster physiology, first aid and medical triage, search & rescue tactics, organization principles, and disaster suppression (Greenberg, 2003). In 2002, 79 volunteers for the City of Eugene, Oregon police department contributed nearly 10,000 hours of service (Chouinard, 2003). If reproduced during 2011, the value of volunteer time, as calculated by the VIPS web page is a savings of \$213,600.00 (VIPS, 2011). In 2009, the City of Irving, Texas, “reported that their program [*citizens on patrol*] saved the city almost \$50,000 through volunteers and \$76,000 in mileage over one year” (Cundiff, 2005, p.4) thus saving a total cost savings of \$126,000.

An additional benefit of volunteers is the need to address the needs of local governments during times of emergencies. Emergencies such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, Oklahoma City Federal Building Bombing, Hurricanes Ike and Rita and, most recently the 2011 wildfires in Bastrop County, Texas all have demonstrated that civilians will in times of crises assist their fellow citizens. If the emergency is large enough, people from all over the country will respond, to provide assistance to those in need thus over whelming the local governments’ abilities to coordinate the response. The use of these volunteers, without training or vetting, can lead to, civil liabilities and

injury to the untrained responding persons who volunteered. Yet, a trained and vetted pool of volunteers can be an invaluable resource of people, skills, and talent (Spradling, 2007) (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2004). This same point has been addressed by Spradling (2007), the Assistant Chief of Police for Arizona State University Police Department: “previous disasters have shown, there are not enough first responders” (para. 23). Due to not having enough first responders, the best possible way of handling these good intentioned people is to have either the local community trained prior to the emergency or pre-identified volunteers trained to assist with the processing of the new volunteers.

The third argument for utilization of volunteers is how it fits within the community policing model being used by many law enforcement agencies today. A Monograph compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance stated, “Community policing is, in essence, a collaboration between the police and the community that identifies and solves community problems. With the police no longer the sole guardians of law and order, all members of the community become active allies” (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994, p. vii). As indicated, the use of community policing engages the community to assist police in the solving and prevention of crime. This model deepens that relationship between the police department and the citizens and the use of volunteers only continues to strengthen this bond.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) cited that “volunteers with your agency will gain a better understanding of the agency itself and law enforcement as a whole. These volunteers can serve as your agency’s ambassadors to the community and can in turn provide valuable feedback to the agency” (IACP, 2005, p. 1). Additional examples of support for the community policing model involving the

citizens is the City of Eugene, Oregon police department recognized again by the Police Chief magazine in their 2003 article regarding the subject. In this article, it was touted as a win/win in that “In the three-plus years since the Eugene Police Department’s volunteer program was launched, it has become a key component of the department’s community policing program” (Chouinard, 2003, p. 30).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

With all the previously listed examples of how citizen volunteers can assist a law enforcement organization, there are still issues that lead agency administrators to not implement these programs. The three specific examples that will be addressed are professional staff’s resistance to the implementation of volunteer programs, the need for additional resources from the constrained budgets for proper background checks and credentialing of volunteers, and the continued maintenance and management of these volunteer programs.

These three arguments were the most referenced reasons for apprehension by law enforcement staffs for the implementation of the volunteer programs and have been referenced since the late 1970s. As recently as the mid to late 2000s, these arguments have made a resurgence which was reflected by the down turn of the American economy and subsequent budget tightening leading to positions going unfilled or layoff’s as indicated by the USA Today article, “Weak economy forces cuts, squeezes police departments” “This is not a typical economic cycle,’ Melekian said. ‘This is fundamentally different” (Johnson & Jackson, 2011, p. 2A). Johnson and Jackson (2011) also referred to Melekian, the director of the Justice Department’s Office of Community Policing Services statement that “the losses will be permanent and will



require agencies to adapt by consolidating services and applying new technologies to meet the demand for services” (p.2A).

For many of the same reasons previously cited as cost savings measure of citizen volunteers, professional staff have reasonable causes for concern that their positions will be cut in order for a volunteer to take over the task. As cited by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), in their 1986 study of volunteering, “The main resistance to volunteers comes from paid sworn staff, who are concerned about job security, loss of overtime pay, personal safety, and professionalism” (AARP, 1986, para 3). Employees are concerned that the administration of the agency will use the volunteers, at no cost, to address the job responsibilities which require a paid staff member to perform. With the economic recession, these fears though first realized in 1986, by AARP, are again being shared as reason to prevent a volunteer program from being implemented. Though the well intentioned concerns of staff regarding personal safety of volunteers and professionalism of the agency is important; the main focus of this rebuttal is towards the job security and loss of overtime pay for the same professional staff. The main idea of volunteers is to perform support functions within an agency which usually removes a paid officer from performing the needed tasks of suppressing crime, specifically patrol and investigation functions (IACP, 2005).

The use of volunteers to perform tasks in an agency are divided into two areas, administrative and field support. Administratively the volunteers can assist with data entry & quality control, crime mapping, crime analysis, internships programs, administrative assistance, victim assistance, cold case squad assistance and translation services. While field support can resemble any of the following citizen patrols,

community presenters, neighborhood watch programs, search and rescue, disaster response, graffiti abatement, special events support, Boy Scout explorer posts, chaplain services and, crime prevention programs (Volunteers in Police Services, 2005).

These programs or duties all increase the quality of service an agency provides to the community and yet can be cumbersome or uninteresting to an officer. These support functions are the additional hats a professional staff member or officer must wear within an organization that frequently removes them from patrol.

With decreasing budgets or heavy restrictions being placed upon a department, many agencies are already being limited or told that overtime costs need to be reduced or eliminated all together. So the idea that overtime is still a valid option for addressing the additional needs or services within the agency is truly no longer an option and is an invalid argument. A City of Denver, Colorado Police Department internal memorandum also addressed this point: "These 'employees' are NOT hired to replace paid staff" (Murray, 2004, para 3). In addition, as identified by the IACP, "The purpose of a law enforcement volunteer program is to supplement and support, not supplant, current agency employees" (IACP, 2005 p. 2).

The second area of concern regarding volunteers is the issue relating to background checks and credentialing of the citizen volunteers. When a citizen is interested in volunteering, agencies have been proactive in conducting a background check, especially in law enforcement, to make sure the people are not a threat to the agency or the community much like the other employees of the department. However, some volunteers are concerned about the invasion of privacy that a background checks by law enforcement. The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a California based organization

established to protect the privacy of individuals cites, “Privacy and security of personal information are common objections volunteers have to background screening.

Volunteers may also feel screening creates an atmosphere of distrust or suspicion” (Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, 2008, para. 17).

Especially in law enforcement, the need for public trust of the persons working or volunteering within the organization is paramount. It is very likely that a gross negligence finding would be determined by a court if an agency did not conduct even the most basic of background checks on potential volunteers. The City of Tempe Police “requires all VIPS volunteers to undergo a background check and polygraph test before they are permitted to work with the department. By prescreening all VIPS volunteers before ... some level of trust in these volunteers is established” (Spradling, 2007, para. 8).

The issue that has the greatest potential for problems with an agency is the management or administration of the volunteers within the organization. Such an example is the early stages of the City of Eugene, Oregon’s Police Department volunteer program. In this volunteer program, “[m]anagement of the department’s volunteers was handed from one manager to another, all of whom were already juggling full plates. The program was not centralized ” (Chouinard, 2003, p. 26). An example such as this causes additional barriers for people interested in assisting law enforcement and they find another avenue to volunteer. A mismanaged program can do an agency more harm than good.

One way to handle volunteers for agencies of middle size to large sized agencies is the hiring of a full-time coordinator. If a full-time person cannot be hired, then the

person who is most passionate about the increase of volunteers within the agency should be selected to manage the program. Though agencies are again facing budget constraints the simple cost versus benefit demonstrated previously can show any government leadership board that the benefits easily outweigh the additional cost. The IACP (2005) points out, "The success of a volunteer program is strongly tied to how well the program is managed." (p.1). The use of volunteers and the management of the programs are as equally important to the success. Continuing to address volunteer management, the IACP (2005) holds that, "A volunteer coordinator must receive some type of training regarding personnel and volunteer management to address any issues that may arise" (p.1).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement is at crossroads as the nation's economy continues to be sluggish and with all the austerity measures being looked at to address the national debt. It is unrealistic to believe that the same level of funding will be present to assist with meeting the increased demand placed upon the police departments of the country. In fact, many of the nation's departments are being forced already by city, county, or state government to either find budget savings or to furlough employees for a set number of days in order to accomplish closing budget gaps. For this reason, law enforcement has to seek new and old or underutilized methods to compensate for the reduced budgets. The simple inclusion of volunteers within an agency is not the cure-all for budget reductions or other cited problems. It is the active recruitment of skilled and talented people which can provide cost savings while increasing the presence of an agency in the community. Law enforcement can no longer do it alone; the community

is needed to support the end mission of creating a safer community. This collaboration of citizen volunteers, professional officers and staff leads to the realization of community policing.

This paper has addressed the benefits of having a volunteer program ranging from the activities that can be done by volunteers, the cost savings and benefits of a successful program and, how it is complementary to the community policing models many agencies seek to fully implement, thus increasing the department's relationship with the citizens of the community. The counterpoints of resistance from paid professional staff, background checks, and the management of the volunteers have been addressed and shown via evidence to be legitimate concerns, yet they can be overcome with a little proper planning and implementation. It is recommended that law enforcement agencies implement a carefully considered volunteer program utilizing citizens to address administrative support and / or field support of law enforcement professionals.

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