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Assessing the Need for Volunteers
within the Communications Division

A Police Research Project
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context	3
Review of Literature or Practice	6
Discussion of Relevant Issues	10
Conclusion/Recommendations	14
Bibliography	15

ABSTRACT

Today's law enforcement officials are faced with a challenge of the increasing crime rate, growing communities, as well as decreasing revenue and tax base, and cuts to in their budgets. It seems the motto in the 21st century for law enforcement is going to be "Do more with less". All areas of law enforcement seem to be plagued with many problems. One of those being shortage of trained personnel.

This paper touches on the history of volunteering. It talks about farming communities and how they rallied around each other in order to build new barns or helped to gather the crops in a timely manner. This policy research paper also looks at the professional police organization we know today, and how it began as a volunteer effort.

The paper focuses on the use of senior volunteers in law enforcement and how they've hindered and helped an ever growing problem of doing more with less. Research includes agencies across the nation who have implemented volunteer programs ranging from crime prevention, property and evidence processing, gang graffiti eradication, and the use of volunteers to produce high quality training videos.

There is some discussion as to the pros and cons of implementing a volunteer program. Some drawbacks have been turnover, liability concerns, violation of confidentiality, and paid employees feeling their jobs may be threatened.

The positive side indicates jobs that were not getting done in the past are now getting done and in some cases those tasks are more accurate. Additionally, new programs have been implemented through the use of technical volunteers.

Overall, research indicates volunteers of all ages are working in various areas of law enforcement and have been successful.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to find the means or resources to help alleviate the problem of understaffing in the communications center. The idea is to use senior volunteers as telecommunicator operators. The volunteers would received the same training as the paid employees receive. Before they begin working on their own, they would receive classroom training, as well as hands-on experience. Their job assignment would be answering the non-emergency administrative phone lines. By gathering information from the calling party, they would input the call for service into a computer aided dispatch system. An officer would then be dispatched to the location.

A survey was taken and it showed many law enforcement agencies across the state having one to four openings in their communications center (Jones). In addition to this, those agencies were also in the process of training new employees. There are many reasons for the shortage.

Results from a survey conducted by Douglas Milener gave an inside look to problems associated with turnover in the dispatch center. Lack of recognition or poor image with the public and police officers (46%). Twenty six percent (26%) said they disliked shift work, fifteen percent (15%) were unhappy with lack of training opportunities, fifteen percent (15%) disliked the high levels of stress, thirteen percent (13%) disliked the confined environment, thirteen percent (13%) stated lack of career advancement and thirteen percent (13%) complained of mediocre supervision (Milender).

Another reason for the turnover is that the job in the communications center is fast-paced, tedious, and unpredictable. The average citizen doesn't possess the skills required to perform under these conditions.

The intended audience for the research project will be police administration, administrators at city hall who assist with the hiring process, city council representatives, and any department interested in getting a handle on the shortage of personnel in the communications center.

Various sources of information was researched and used for this project. Several interviews from agencies currently using volunteers were conducted, as well as interviews with volunteers themselves. Articles from monthly magazines, as well as other research papers were also used.

The intended outcome of the policy research paper is to show that volunteers, focusing on senior citizens, can play a vital role in law enforcement.

Historical, Legal, or Theoretical Context

Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus' definition of volunteer is one who chooses freely to do something, as entering military service. To offer or give of one's own free will. To enter into any service of one's own free will (Websters, 688).

The spirit of volunteering has been prevalent for hundreds of years. In the 1800's communities rallied together to see that crops were gathered in a timely manner. If a barn needed building all they had to do was spread the word and people from all over the county came to help. Unlike today, these people didn't have the money or the resources to pick and chose who they did or did not want to help them. They had to rely on others to help get things done.

The professional police organization as we know it today actually originated from a volunteer effort. Volunteers were our first police officers as well as the first police agencies. It was not until the early 19th century that police officers were actually paid. By the 1870's, every major city in the United States had a paid full-time police force (Weiner 5-10).

A text written by Richard Sundeen and Gilbert Siegel quotes Eileen Gary by saying:

During the colonial period, the New England "Watch and Ward Societies", an early version of citizen patrols, marked the onset of American volunteers in criminal justice. Somewhat later, the western "posse" became the popular image of volunteerism (qtd in Gary 49).

In her review of volunteers in police services, Garry categorizes volunteer efforts into (1) self-defense and (2) organized auxiliary. The first type of volunteer activities develop out of citizen dissatisfaction with the government in providing security and includes current citizen patrol and self defense groups such as the Guardian Angles. Garry goes on to state the other type of volunteers in police are organized auxiliaries which "...involve citizen volunteers working under the auspices of an existing law enforcement agency." Generally, these volunteers are trained and sometimes uniformed and perform roles similar to sworn police officers. Some of those include reserve officers, community service officers, and neighborhood assistance officers.

A modern group of organized volunteers known as the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program or R.S.V.P. is a national, non-profit organization funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Texas Department on Aging. The organization provides people 55 years of age and older with the opportunity to share their talents and lifetime experiences through volunteer service. The program matches the assignments with the volunteers' interests and skills. Job assignments vary. Agencies use volunteers in schools, museums, libraries, nursing homes, social service agencies, and other non-profit organizations. Some tasks include tutoring, delivering meals for the elderly and disabled, providing transportation, working in an elections office, and assisting with children's programs.

Other duties include serving on community boards and advisory councils using skills in journalism, law, education, etc. Volunteers are also trained to assist with taxes or Medicare/Medicaid problems. An R.S.V.P. member volunteers at their convenience. Hours are arranged to meet the individuals schedule. There is no minimum number of service hours required, but to be considered an active member and to be covered by R.S.V.P. supplemental insurance, volunteers must serve and report at least one hour every three months (Davis).

Another group of organized volunteers was formed in 1976 by a small group of church women called Church Women United. These women saw a need to feed the hungry in their neighborhood. That need quickly grew to include the homebound and elderly. The program continued to grow and before long an executive director, along with an executive board was formed. The program is now called "Meals on Wheels, Plus."

The organization consists of 200 volunteers who deliver 600 hot meals a day, 5 days a week. Volunteer service time ranges from 1 to 20 years. There is one volunteer from the original group still serving today (Lane).

Historically, one reason there has been a problem keeping volunteers is due to burn out. In most organizations, profit or non-profit, there is a core group of individuals who can be called on for anything. It doesn't take long to know who those individuals are. These are the people that usually keep a program or organization going but these are also the people that suffer from burnout.

Chuck Johnston, driver for Meals on Wheels, Plus states one way to eliminate burnout is to balance the workload. Another way is to give the volunteer tasks that interest them or fits their lifestyle. Mr. Johnston states an unbalanced workload or tasks that don't appeal to a volunteer will cause burnout, which in turn makes them look for another place to donate their time (Johnston).

Review of Literature or Practice

In a paper written by Ray F. Dorsey, titled "Volunteers in Law Enforcement, Changing Times-New Approaches", he surveyed seven agencies and how those agencies approached "non-traditional" law enforcement programs. During his research, he stated he found very limited information detailing "non-traditional" law enforcement programs. He goes on to say he did identify some that were highly innovative and productive (28).

Overall, it appears senior volunteers are used in the area of crime prevention, prepare uniform crime reports, process warrants, and perform various clerical duties. Mr. Dorsey found the Colorado Springs Police Department to be one of the more advanced

departments. Volunteers are used in crime analysis, warrant detail, and used on an organized crime task force, just to name a few. Mr. Dorsey concluded from the survey there are some very innovative approaches to use of senior volunteers in law enforcement.

One benefit Mr. Dorsey noted as to the use of volunteers is that they can help reduce crime. He stated officers can focus on crime that require special skills and training while volunteers handle the more routine day to day operations of the police department.

In a program implemented by South Gate, California police department their volunteers range in age from 18 to 80. They have found those over the age of 40 were the most dependable. Initially, 12 volunteers were recruited but that number quickly swelled to 45 because additional areas were identified within the department where volunteers could be used. Some volunteer assignments are telephone follow-up interviews, residential and community security surveys to assist in crime prevention, assignments in the traffic division to handle reports phoned in, as well as handling walk-in customers, fingerprinting citizens, court liaison and working on home security projects such as installing locks (Troxil).

Several agencies in California were faced with the need to maintain a high level of service with less funding. They took a different route to utilizing volunteers. Agencies in southern California developed successful technical reserve programs. Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department took members from the television and film industry and the unit produces high quality training films, assists with covert video taping and films special events. In Los Alamitos, California, the police department uses technical volunteers as evidence technicians. And in Inglewood, California they have developed their own technical reserve program. Their program consists of two types of specialists: technical reserves and technical reserve associates. The technical reserves possess a skill or talent that the department needs frequently, such as computer programming or foreign language ability. They must donate at least 100 hours of service a year or risk being dropped from the program. The technical reserve associates have expertise in an area that the

department uses only during an emergency or unusual event. Those events might include functioning as an amateur radio operator, used on a search and rescue team, used on a fugitive apprehension squad or aerial surveillance group (Brown).

Senior volunteers at one department in Washington and at two departments in California receive training in first aid, CPR, and defensive driving. In addition, they are trained to routine patrol residences for out of town occupants, tag abandoned vehicles, register bicycles, enforce handicapped parking restrictions, along with several other tasks (Sunset).

Other research shows one department in Texas utilizing senior volunteers for matching up stolen property with recovered property. They are also used in the area of crime analysis, asset inventory, and pin mapping (Sandlin).

Change of philosophy in the workplace does affect volunteerism. The traditional style of management is that an employee must devoting eight or nine hours to the workplace. Research has shown the idea of bringing volunteers into the department works for both the department as well as the volunteers. I believe the same thing works for the employees of the department. By bringing volunteers into the workplace and observing how they interact and affect the lives of the employees, upper management has come to realize that part of making a well rounded employee comes in part by allowing an employee to devote part of their workday to activities outside the organization with the understanding they are still representing their department. It might be as simple as delivering a hot meal during your lunch hour or taking an hour or two to read to school age children.

For example, several officers from the Abilene Police Department volunteer an hour or two every week to read to kindergarten children. During the Christmas holidays, these same officers, along with their spouse, personally finance a Christmas party for the kids. The support and gratitude received from the teachers, as well as the children, is very fulfilling. One civilian employee delivers hot lunches during her lunch hour one day a

week (Jones). This particular organization, mentioned earlier in this paper, is manned by 200 volunteers who deliver 600 hot meals every day, five days a week. Without the dedication and strong support of the volunteers, as well as the support given by employers themselves, organizations such as this one would have a hard time keeping their doors open.

Another example of volunteerism is an officer having seen a need to help kids who have been handled by the Abilene Police Department for minor offenses but who are still salvageable. Those officers, on their own time, are taking the juveniles to the local prison to give them an up close and personal view of the prison system. The program has been in operation for 2 years and results have shown a 70% decrease in repeat offenders (Pope). This program has shown through self initiated activity and volunteering of their time, officers have made a small impact on juvenile crime.

While the afore mentioned information doesn't explain how other departments use volunteers, it does show how this department has the insight to understand that their employees are a part of the community. Just like other volunteers, they want to feel a part of the community. They do so by volunteering their time.

Research finds that, with the exception of a few departments, volunteers are used in the same job functions. Some agencies do vary their duties according to the size of the department and the number of specialized divisions. The research did not find the utilization of volunteers, of any age group, in the communications division. This would be an innovative idea. The key would be matching the volunteer to the appropriate task. Cherry Gleason, senior volunteer for the Abilene Police Department, stated choosing the right person for a particular task is critical. If the job is something that doesn't interest the volunteer, they lose interest and will possibly move on to something else (Gleason). If the volunteer and task are not matched properly, two critical things happen. One is you no longer have someone doing that job or someone else would have to pick up the slack and two, you could lose a volunteer.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

One of the key issues in this paper is finding a way to do more with less. Police administrators are faced with the burden to continue to provide high quality service with the same resources they have had for the past five to ten years. Cities are growing and so is the crime rate but administrators are not getting additional personnel or monies to combat the problem.

Continued turnover keeps the department in a constant state of training. This, in turn, leaves the agency understaffed and in some cases undertrained.

Another issue that has been examined is a growing population of people, especially senior citizens, who are wanting to volunteer their time, and then trying to decide how these people can be of service to their community. One employee from a non-profit organization stated volunteers just want to be of service. She also stated the senior citizen needs a reason to get out of bed every day. Volunteering their time gives them that reason (Turnbow).

One very important issue to keep in mind is making sure the volunteer is matched with a task that is of interest to them. Research has shown volunteers are used in a variety of areas. Some of those are community service events, crime analysis, and property and evidence processing. One department utilizes volunteers in the victim assistance program, gang graffiti enforcement and eradication, and civilian surveillance programs (Liddell).

One thing I kept hearing through my research is that a volunteer needs to be matched with a task they enjoy. They want a meaningful job. They want to feel like they are making a difference (Burtner).

Some of the reasons a department doesn't utilize volunteers has to do with liability issues. Mr. Dorsey's research states volunteers can be used providing proper insurance coverage is in place. He notes that in some cases adding volunteers doesn't significantly increase premiums. He does stress liability coverage needs to be provided for all

volunteers and urges all agencies to speak with their risk management personnel before implementing a volunteer program (36).

Another concern departments have for not implementing a volunteer program is violation of confidentiality. All employees, whether paid or volunteer, have varied access to confidential information. The volunteers must understand they fall under the same policy and procedure as paid volunteers when it comes to confidential matters. Their access to confidential information would be on a need to know basis, just like a paid employee.

An additional area of concern with implementing a volunteer program is that paid employees might feel their jobs are being threatened (Lane). If a volunteer is trained to do the same job as a paid employee and the volunteer is performing as well or better than the employee, that paid employee may feel threatened with their job. On the other hand, that same situation could turn a non-productive employee into a productive one (Davis). To help eliminate fear of job loss, the paid employees need to understand the reason for the use of volunteers. They need to understand they are not being replaced with "free labor".

Some departments worry that if a neighborhood watch group isn't closely monitored, the group could turn into potential vigilantes, seeking to "get them before they get us." (Greenberg). The key to keep this from occurring is careful screening of watch captains, conducting background checks and periodically polling the neighbors for their comments or concerns.

Other problems encountered with volunteer programs is the turnover rate, dependability factor, and extensive supervisory needs. In an article published in the *Telemasp Bulletin* it states the most frequently reported problem was turnover (16%), followed by dependability (10%). Staff/volunteer conflict, confidentiality, extensive supervision needs and citizen/volunteer conflict all averaged 3.3% (Brock).

One valuable opportunity agencies seem to overlook when deciding to implement a volunteer program is the number of senior citizens willing and able to donate their time.

This group of people has been in the workforce longer than most of us have been alive. They can offer a unique and different approach to the way things have been done. In an article written by Nachie Marquez she states that volunteers are community-mined people who want to feel they are making a real contribution. When they are offered opportunities that are more meaningful than the traditional roles of filing reports and shredding paper, the result can be very rewarding (Marquez). Marquez goes on to say the answer is to treat volunteers similar to employees. They were selective, had job descriptions with periodic evaluations, and gave the volunteers a sense of belonging.

Few administrators would disagree with the fact they are having to do more with less. Communities are asking for more from their municipalities but want the tax rate left the same. Eighty percent of the departments budget is directed towards salary. If volunteers can be used in place of paid labor, portions of that budget can be redistributed enabling an agency to do more with less.

Training of new employees takes a tremendous amount of time, as well as money. That is an issue seldom addressed. Since senior volunteers are giving of their own free will, chances for constant turnover and ongoing training would probably decrease. Hopefully this would reduce the departments training hours and training dollars.

One valuable benefit Mr. Dorsey notes in his research is political support (34). When volunteers, especially senior citizens, are utilized in the day to day operation of law enforcement, they become aware of what it takes to keep the department going. This provides valuable political support for issues concerning salary, training and equipment needs, etc.

One benefit noted by Lt. Mark Moore of the Abilene Police Department is that work is now getting done that wasn't being done in the past. In some cases, the work is more accurate. Moore stated the volunteers have no other job duties that would interfere with what they are doing, such as phones ringing or having to wait on the front counter. This produces highly accurate work in a timely manner. Moore noted since the program

began in 1994, \$80,000 to \$100,000 in stolen property has been recovered (Moore).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The purpose and problem examined in this paper is to try and find a way to do more with less. Police administrators are faced with shrinking budgets while still trying to get a handle on the rising crime rate. In addition, communities are growing but revenue or the tax base doesn't necessarily grow with the community.

The area of concern is alleviating the problem of understaffing and shortage of trained personnel in the dispatch center. The idea is to use volunteers as calltakers. The paper focused on the use of volunteers, mainly senior citizens, and how they are already being used in law enforcement today.

This matter being considered has proven to be the answer to problems of manpower shortage or other problem areas in law enforcement. It is my belief it would be the answer to some problems in the communications center.

Through my research I have come to the conclusion this would be a program that could work. People want to volunteer their time. People, especially senior citizens, want and need a sense of fulfillment, they need company, and want to know they are needed. Research has shown work is getting done that hasn't gotten done in the past. Or, through utilization of technical volunteers, new projects are being created.

The key throughout this paper is finding or matching a volunteer with the proper task. It is recommended that the Abilene Police Department and city administration take a close look at the program. Through proper screening, background check, training and evaluating, and matching the volunteer with the proper task, a minimum of two problems would be solved. One being alleviating the problem of turnover, understaffing, and under trained personnel and second tapping into a group of citizens willing and able to give of their time and expertise.

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