

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Regionalization as an Answer for
Small Town SWAT Teams**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Nic Emmons**

**Sherman Police Department
Sherman, Texas
February 2018**

ABSTRACT

Citizens, city councils, and elected officials expect local police departments to respond to and handle a variety of dangerous and violent situations. Many of these situations require equipment and skills that are advanced well beyond the standard training officers receive in police academy. Because of the dangers involved, many agencies see the need to develop special units often called Specialized Weapons and Tactics teams (SWAT). Because of a number of complexities, budget constraints and manpower issues, many small police agencies find it difficult to staff, fund, and maintain SWAT teams. Beyond the initial overview, administrative control issues may also emerge.

The purpose of this research paper is to identify and resolve the resulting issues and recommend a number of solutions. Any agency which lacks the employees, funding, or equipment needed to successfully contain and control an incident should partner with other agencies of similar geographic location. The combining of resources results in a greater benefit to the citizen safety as well as reducing economic strain. To support this position, the researcher utilized articles, newspapers, internet sites, and publications from the leading experts in the field of SWAT research and standards.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, police agencies have had to develop new strategies in order to keep up with the current trends in crime and develop solutions to combat aggressive and violent behavior. Haberman (2014) writes in the mid to late 1960's The City of Los Angeles saw the need for a special division capable of handling complex and dangerous situations because of several recent violent crimes. They developed a team of para-militaristic members who were trained in the use of special weapons and techniques used to resist the aggression they encountered. This division was called the Specialized Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) (Haberman, 2014). Currently there are a number of different names used by agencies for SWAT teams. A simple internet search turns up several different variations, all with similar descriptions and job specifics. Whatever the name used to depict the SWAT team, the essential job function, to resolve critical and dangerous situations, remains the same across the country.

The need for SWAT has not diminished and violence continues to be a trend. Since September 11, 2001, international terrorism continues to be an ongoing threat in the United States (US). International terrorists are actively trying to recruit citizens inside of the United States to conduct violent attacks (United States White House, 2011). There is not any indication that international terrorism will cease in the future. If the past is any indication of the future, the question is not will an attack happen again, but when and where the attacks will occur. After the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001, it could be considered naïve to think terrorism is not likely in the United States.

The potential for an international terrorism attack within the United States is not the only potential problem. Law enforcement and the federal government as a whole

must also combat domestic terrorism. These attacks are not always committed by foreign-born nationalists. Most recently on June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen, killed 49 people in a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida in a single act of terrorism (Stack, 2016).

The Officers Association (NTOA) suggests that Tier 1 SWAT teams need to be able to respond to a number of issues including hazardous warrants, barricaded person(s), hostage rescue, and dignitary protection (NTOA, 2015). Tactical operations can be lengthy and require extensive planning and personnel. They can also be complex and, as in the name, the tactics can be specialized and require officers to be proficient in specific technique(s).

Currently law enforcement agencies across America are facing budget constraints and manpower issues. Agencies face a lack of budgeted money, their equipment inventory is low, or their equipment is unserviceable (Challans, 2013). Without the issuance of new equipment, old, expired, or unserviceable equipment must remain in service and could potentially result in an unsafe situation. The problem compounds itself annually when equipment cannot be replaced and the inventory of outdated or unserviceable equipment grows exponentially. Simple mathematics show that the cost multiplies until agencies cannot afford to keep current teams operable.

Staffing a SWAT team also poses its own set of issues. Challans (2013) asserts there is often little interest or only a few qualified officers who want to be a part of a SWAT Team. Police agencies are already generally understaffed resulting in fewer qualified candidates to choose from. Even after a team member is selected, they require a training period or apprenticeship where they learn the skills needed for the new position they hold. NTOA Standards (2015) require, at a minimum, a “basic”

SWAT class. The classes range from 40-60 hours depending on the agencies who host them. Once team members are trained, agencies still face retention issues just like any other law enforcement carrier. Retention and staffing issues exist because officers either voluntarily remove themselves or are forced to leave a team for a variety of reasons. Some such reasons are retirement, disciplinary or personal conflicts. Because of the length of time required to train a new member and the inability of agencies to predict team vacancies, one could conclude that agencies should allot a few extra positions. These extra positions allow agencies to have a continual supply of the minimum number of operators ready to deploy. The unexpected retention issues previously discussed do not account for vacations, holidays, or sick days where operators cannot be reached.

While people, resources, and equipment seem to pose a continual problem, another factor that plagues small tactical teams is the duration of operators on scene. There is no set formula to determine how long every tactical operation may take. The possibilities can range from seconds, minutes, or up to days for barricaded subjects such as The Branch Davidian's in Waco. One thing that is certain on an extended operation, team members will have to be relieved for various personal functions such as to sleep, eat, or use the restroom, as these are basic human functions and needs.

In the NTOA'S *Tactical Response Operations Standard* (2015), they indicate a minimum team count of 15 members is needed but a team of that size has their capabilities limited. It is impossible for agencies with fewer than 15 members to create a SWAT team of 15 officers if agencies do not already possess those resources. Police agencies are unlikely to have more than 10 percent of employees who are qualified

applicants from among the ranks (Fairburn, 2013). This indicates that in order to acquire 15 team members a general department size or candidate pool would need to be an average of at least 150 officers. This seems to pose a rather difficult task and needs to be combated. Small police organizations across America should combine resources with other agencies in order to combat the complex and dangerous situations they are expected to resolve.

POSITION

The problem for small police agencies to maintain their own SWAT team can be a drain on their staffing and finances. Smaller agencies should combine resources and form multi-jurisdictional SWAT Teams. According to Berkowitz (2007), "Forging new partnerships while strengthening existing ones may be the single most important element leaders can offer their agencies" (para.1). Multi-jurisdictional SWAT teams are created when two or more agencies create a SWAT team composed of trained professionals using officers from all agencies. The agencies then become a single unit designed to respond to incidents that arise within the agreeing agencies communities.

There is a great amount of evidence to support that combining agencies can be a valuable and powerful tool for law enforcement based on the trends of the day. An example of one positive partnership was the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) who now currently cross train with SWAT, often called Tactical Emergency Medical Support (TEMS). Prior to the implementation of TEMS, medics may or may not have been on the scene, but generally in a distant and secure, protected location. Over time, there was a realization that it was beneficial and necessary for TEMS to take a more active role within a SWAT team. Medical personnel were not immediately accessible when

officers were shot and/or killed. Due to safety concerns for the medical professionals, they were not able to assist until a scene was secured. Some of the medical needs were so immediate that TEMS were created and their role was modified and integrated into a more active part of the SWAT team (Weiss & Davis, 2006).

Multi-jurisdictional SWAT teams are the answer to police departments who are unable to individually fund and staff a SWAT team. In examining the standards set forth by the NTOA they identify capable SWAT teams as having a minimum of 15 officers, and up to 26 officers, depending on what tier the agencies wish to comply with (NTOA, 2015). It is important to identify the fact that 26 officers are the minimum number and not a maximum number to achieve the Tier 1 status. Clearly, each agency should be encouraged to have more officers than the minimum.

As previously stated all law enforcement agencies have some form of turnover or staffing issues. When this information is coupled with knowledge that inevitably officers will not always be able to attend due to scheduling conflicts, personal agendas, sick days, or emergencies, one can quickly see the importance of having a need for a percentage of manpower over the minimum staffing. Because there are a number of unforeseen reasons for shortages in manpower, agencies should give careful consideration to determining staffing requirements. Adequate numbers of capable staff members might be the greatest dilemma agencies face.

Smaller agencies that have determined they have a need for a SWAT team but do not have a large enough work force should create an appropriate size candidate pool by joining into partnerships with a number of agencies. This partnership should be with agencies that are geographically close in location, until the desired team selection size

is available. According to French (2010), a minimum of an eight-man team is used to enter a structure, with an ideal two or three officers going into a single room at a time. This number does not include any of the support staff that is needed outside the residence such as perimeter teams, sniper teams, arrest teams, chemical teams, less than lethal teams, or port and cover teams. As one can see, the numbers can quickly add up.

A small agency must also consider the importance of exhaustion and the importance of relieving staff for when an operation is unusually long. This could include team members who need something as simple as a bathroom break, where only one or two extra people may be needed, to an entirely new or support team for occasions when a callout goes so long the officers need to sleep. In any event, support staff should be planned out well in advance. NTOA (2015), states each SWAT team should develop a policy that covers how to switch officers and commanders in extended operations. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) should be signed in advance with support agencies. Since this need is only for extended period operations, support agencies, though preferable, need not be as close in proximity as agencies involved in the main multi-jurisdiction team.

Beyond the benefits of increased manpower in combining personal teams, another benefit for agencies that join into partnership is an increase in equipment and financial funding for teams. When examining the partnership between the federal government and local agencies with regard to counterterrorism, it was said that by combining local agency resources with the federal government's resources, the federal government was substantially more efficient in dealing and combating terrorism (United

States White House, 2011). Local agencies would have benefited from the federal government's assistance and resources, but the community benefited with increased safety and security. The concept of agencies sharing cost and safety benefits, though on a larger scale, still holds true when applied to a smaller setting such as a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team. Sharing the cost for equipment is not the only sure fix to budgetary constraints. Sharing existing equipment seems to be a viable option.

Tactical teams have a tremendous need for special equipment and use a variety of equipment such as breaching tools, protective vests (Kevlar), vehicles, and weapons. Much of this equipment already exists and is currently in use within existing SWAT teams. It is a substantial financial relief for smaller agencies to avoid purchasing the equipment for themselves when first starting out. This cost savings is ultimately passed down to the citizens who reside in the community. With fewer agencies purchasing repetitive equipment, the result is less spending across the board and the government is leaner in its spending, which all equals less waste and abuse of taxpayer dollars.

By combining agencies and increasing in size, it affords for the cost of maintaining the team to be distributed across all of the agencies involved (Challens, 2013). Depending on the team size, there are often tactical "scholarships" through agencies like the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association (TTPOA) and NTOA that help fund agencies who could not otherwise support themselves. The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) is a program implemented by the US government that gives away used military equipment to local law enforcement agencies who are in need (Challens, 2013). Again this is equipment already owned and purchased by the

government and is available to be repurposed. Rather than the equipment being destroyed, the cost benefit is again passed on to the local government level. Much of the equipment may be better than the respective law enforcement agencies could buy with their available funds.

As equipment needs increase and agencies budgets decrease there must be a better way to obtain equipment that is essential to their job function. Since agencies are combining themselves to have greater manpower, agencies which normally have maintained 8-10 operators ideally could supply less members resulting in an increase in already purchased and owned equipment. The equipment could be helpful to newly joining or formed agencies until the department can afford to fully budget or fund the department's team members. This takes corroboration on the part of all agencies involved. An agency supplying less team members distributes overtime and training hours over several agencies, costing each individual jurisdiction less. Agencies can also distribute the cost associated with maintenance and purchase of equipment. No matter how an agency looks at combining resources, the benefits are clearly seen as financially advantageous for all involved.

Another benefit of a multi-jurisdictional team is the variety of knowledge and experience that comes from combining officers from different agencies with different tenures and skill sets. Obviously not all agencies perform or conduct business the same way just as businesses do not all operate the same way. When working in groups with a variety of experience levels, a broader perspective is obtained, and there are new ideas and skills. Each person has had different past experiences and situations that have taught valuable lessons. The advantages of groups have been applied within the

business industry all over the world for years. If groups with a variety of experience are good, one could conclude there would not be a difference when working to resolve a tactical incident. In fact, experience is generally considered a benefit when applying for jobs or careers. One could anticipate that officers responding to calls in a rural area have a different set of skills than those responding to calls in an urban area. The variety of knowledge when shared within a team results in a greater set of skills for all.

COUNTER POSITION

Even though there are benefits to individual agencies that join multi-jurisdictional teams, smaller agencies may operate exclusively on their own to avoid working with other agencies and releasing of some control to another jurisdiction. This is not a new problem to law enforcement. As Ratcliffe (2008) states, "Law Enforcement in the US, given its historical and political origins, is fragmented and lacks both vertical and horizontal coordination, a management issue documented since the Presidents Commission on Law Enforcement Administration of Justice in 1967" (p. 24). This has been an issue since 1967 and will likely continue until agencies learn to check and balance some of the egos associated with who should and should not be in control. As some agencies have refused to relinquish control this has proven to be a challenge in all levels of the government who wish to partner together. One question that must be asked is whether administrators who wish to partner together will relinquish some of their span of control in order to create a larger more efficient team. This is not an easy task and seems to challenge all levels of the government who wish to collaborate together (United States White House, 2011).

In the past, when agencies have been forced to work together, either out of necessity or requested another's assistance, there have been many arguments over who is in control of the operation. Consequently, when teams do work together, they often function independently and do not contribute to the greater cause or team effort. As Marcos (2011) suggested, it is not the correct time to argue about who is in charge while agencies are in the full swing of a crisis event. His work indicates partnerships need to be formed well in advance. With preplanning, agencies already know who is in charge and know how to operate together.

There is substantial evidence to support that agencies can and often do work together. The NTOA has been working with law enforcement agencies all over the country, helping them to establish multi-jurisdictional teams for over twenty-five years (NTOA, 2015). As seen previously, TEMS were integrated together with SWAT and have been successful in the partnership. What seems to be of great importance is that each team has clearly established guidelines, powers, and responsibilities in advance to alleviate any confusion or need for control. These documents have previously appeared in this paper and are called Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Inter-Governmental Agreement's (IGA).

Fairburn (2013) stated that many multi-jurisdictional teams were formed in the past and are still currently successful. A side effect of working together and knowing the other agencies members is trust. Trust is seen as positive, over and over again, in many different types of relationships, from personal to business. By teams working together they share a common thread or goal and interests switch to one of tolerance to mutual trust (Berkowitz, 2007).

Another example of teams working together is the vast amount of agencies training together. Currently cooperative training takes place within the National Incident Management System (NIMS). NIMS is designed to incorporate all agencies from the federal and state level together for major disasters or on small scale like two agencies offering training to each other. In Morrison, Colorado several surrounding agencies offered to host trainings to help get a newly formed multi-jurisdictional SWAT team (Challans, 2013). Whatever the obstacle, a number of agencies have learned to put aside their differences and work together for the common good within the community.

Another hindrance to developing a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team is a concept that law enforcement agencies are becoming over militarized. Fairburn (2013) argues that creating a small town SWAT team that is ill equipped to handle certain situations gives the public an opportunity to criticize police agencies for being overly militarized. In his article Fairburn (2013) writes about agencies who obtained equipment that was well beyond the needs of the agencies. Because of government grants and homeland security, agencies have been able to purchase equipment that would not have otherwise normally been available.

A good check and balance to the over militarization of a team is being intentional and deliberate when and how multi-jurisdictional SWAT teams are used. Fairburn (2013) indicates that if agencies conduct good training, keep their staffing to a minimum, and only respond to calls that SWAT should handle, they have a better chance of minimizing public criticism. This does leave room for inconsistency as to when and how agencies determine if SWAT is needed. An agency should consider a Risk Assessment or Risk Matrix because they essentially standardize when SWAT callouts occur. These

documents generally provide a set of situations and circumstances that hold a numerical value. One can input a number based on different details involving the type of crisis the agency is facing. Then, based on a scoring system, the decision to utilize or not utilize SWAT is based off of the matrix. With good leadership, careful selection of appropriate equipment, and sound police tactics, agencies can easily demonstrate they are not militaristic based. Agencies must also develop thorough and robust policies governing its conduct to be within the current expectations and norms of the community.

RECOMMENDATION

Police agencies all over the country must be ready to handle a number of critical incidents. The public expects the police to be able to respond to and resolve any emergency situation. For these reasons, all police agencies need to have a plan in place to guide them should the need for a SWAT team arise. The agencies plan should be in place long before the need for a SWAT team occurs. Lack of planning can often result in spontaneous and poor decisions. This places citizens and officers in potentially dangerous situations that may have been able to be avoided. Because of the great financial limitations and size of many police agencies, it is important for agencies to work together and form partnerships. These partnerships should include a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team when agencies cannot reach safe team levels within their own jurisdiction. It is not the purpose of this research paper to state a specific number, but provide a generalization based on national standards.

Whatever method and team size agencies decide on, they must give careful consideration to the response and types of incidents they desire to handle. The need may arise where additional agencies and members should be added. This can be

accomplished by amending the agreement between all agencies involved. There are a number of different criteria that can be used to determine the size of team. Possibly the best method for determining the required number of team members is an analysis of the jobs that are preformed (Wilson & Weiss, 2013). By analyzing past tactical callouts, an agency may be able to predict, with reasonable accuracy, an appropriate team size or by contacting an organization such as their local state or federal tactical organization for this information.

A secondary evaluation tool that could be used in determining the number of team members is examining and setting a minimum staff number. There appears to be several problems with this approach for long term planning because no one SWAT callout is the same and geographic locations change. However, the minimum staff approach looks at the job functions of the team and assigns the minimum number possible to accomplish its specific job function (Wilson & Weiss, 2013). This procedure will still give agencies a starting point when surveying the landscape for initial staffing needs.

The cost benefit of sharing supplies is the second greatest advantage. With diminishing budgets, agencies may choose to divide the cost with participating agencies by percentage. The bigger the agency size or number of annual uses, the greater the cost. However agencies decide to divide up the cost, it is important to have a MOU's or IGA detailing any costs at the onset of the partnership. One area not previously mentioned is an option for teams to contract their services out to nearby agencies for financial support only. This paper does not address such contracts but some agencies and teams may consider it beneficial.

Even though some agencies are intimidated by the thought of releasing control and do not work well together, there appears to be substantial evidence to suggest that separate agencies can overcome conflict and work together in a mutual partnership. By having a clear and defined chain of command and set of standards, there should not be a need for egos to get hurt or confusion about who is responsible. Good leadership will combat the over-militarization concept. If leadership makes wise equipment purchases and only uses SWAT teams when needed to protect the public from a substantial threat, the public's opinion will likely be positive. Agencies are encouraged to obtain and utilize a Threat Matrix to assist in determining when a team should be used.

Critical incidents do not appear to be diminishing in any area. If past domestic and international terrorism incidents are any indication of the future, agencies need to be prepared to handle a number of dangerous situations. The best plan is one that is created in advance and details how agencies can work together. As agencies work together, they build better partnerships and trust, thus resulting in better results for the public. In order for agencies to learn to work together, they must first communicate and foster an environment of mutual need. If agencies take small steps to integrate training together, team building, form relationships, and work together, a multi-jurisdictional team can be developed. Small law enforcement agencies should combine physical and personnel resources in order to more effectively benefit the community. As agencies combine, the key to success may be shifting focus towards developing strong leadership and setting goals oriented towards interagency cooperation.

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