

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Administration Should Strengthen the Department  
Through Rotating Positions**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Police administrations are faced with many difficult decisions and obstacles as they provide law enforcement services to the public. The key factor in providing quality service is the personnel in which they employ. Since 2010 it has been difficult for agencies to hire and keep quality police officers. Administrations are tasked with finding new and innovative ways to hire employees and retain them. The opportunity of moving throughout a police agency can be used as a hiring tactic. Police departments can accomplish the goal of keeping their employees by setting up a rotating schedule. This type of schedule is key to keeping officers engaged in the organization. It will challenge the officers as they move through different roles within the department while increasing their skills, knowledge, and morale. While moving through the different roles, the officers will become better trained, which will strengthen the department. Strengthening the department through rotating positions will work, if implemented based on the department it is designed for. Officers on rotating positions will learn all aspects of the agency and be able to take the department's message forward.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many problems facing law enforcement agencies today. Some of the problems facing law enforcement are public opinion, hiring, retention, training, and lack of career development. Media coverage has negatively impacted the image of law enforcement and has made it a less than desirable career path. This, in turn, has led to a decline of qualified applicants (Buck, 2017). Furthermore, officers choosing to retire early or make a career change weakens the police department. Officers are getting out of law enforcement for a multitude of reasons, but none more prevalent than the social justice protest and how law enforcement is being portrayed in the media (Maxouris, 2020). When an officer decides to retire early or resign, they take decades of experience with them. This reduces the functionality of a department because the agency must find a replacement. These replacements often do not have the same level of experience.

Many police agencies assign personnel based on seniority and do not rotate their people out of positions unless there are retirements and subsequent promotions. From an agency standpoint this practice appears to be the fairest and most common approach. This approach does come with its own set of unique problems. Officers working night shift are more likely to be complained on. The Force Science Institute found that night shift officers draw a disproportionate number of complaints compared to all other shifts combined (Remsberg, 2018). Tenured day shift officers become lax in their jobs and begin to forget how to investigate crimes. Investigators who are assigned to criminal investigations for long periods of time can develop a feeling of elitism (Gabor, 1999).

Police departments are responsible to the citizens they serve and the officers they employ. Police officers are unique in their job assignments, abilities, and relationships with the public. Law enforcement agencies should continue to strengthen the department through rotating positions within the organization. Rotating positions also help officers with job satisfaction and career development.

## **POSITION**

Implementing a rotating system in a police department is a subject of debate at most agencies. Opinions within police departments are usually based on the individual's current assignments but from an objective point of view, rotating positions benefits the police department and all officers. A rotating system is simply setting time limits on positions within the police department. Scheduling rotating positions would help an agency from becoming stagnate, allow officers to understand the department's mission, reduce burnout, increase knowledge, and add vitality to the organization (Gabor, 1999).

It is common knowledge among police officers and administrators that, patrol officers are the backbone of all police departments. These officers are critical to the success of any agency because they deal directly with the public. They are the first to arrive on the scene, to any event, no matter the size. The department's success rests on these officers being successful. It is essential to find a way to reduce burnout, enhance their knowledge, skills, and morale.

Officers can face burnout when they go unchallenged for too long or left in a position with no signs of future development. The Mayo Clinic defines job burnout as a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Several factors cause

stress in an officer's life. A few examples are long hours, extended shift hours, and repetitive assignments (Shiftwork Solutions, 2018). Jerry Carlton, a law enforcement veteran, suggests changing assignments, rotating shifts, and even provide temporary assignments which can reduce burnout among officers (Carlton, 2009). Burnout is a serious problem that affects the department's working environment and the officer's home life.

Furthermore, employees left in the same position for an extended time often become stagnate. When stagnation occurs in a position, it can lead to a reduction in job satisfaction and reduced morale (Energize & enhance employee value, 2008). These employees develop bad traits such as laziness and tunnel vision (Gabor, 1999). They often forget how to investigate crimes and look for ways to get out of taking reports. Other officers must work twice as hard to assist the disengaged officers which impacts morale. They are often referred to as "retired on duty" because they lack motivation. This type of officer is frequently a significant source of dissension on a shift or at the agency. Having officers stay on a shift indefinitely or, for long periods of time, can create complacency within the officer which reduces their effectiveness. The term complacent is defined without awareness of some potential danger or defect (Dictionary.com, 2020).

Officers placed on the graveyard shift, due to lack of seniority, often become disgruntled because they believe they will stay on this schedule for most of their careers. Some officers will rethink their career and leave law enforcement altogether if there is no sign of future change. Other officers begin to look at other agencies in hopes of advancing their career, due to having more opportunities in another organization. Officers who work on night shift for prolonged periods are exposed to more serious

crimes and potentially dangerous encounters with the public. This often skews the officer's perceptions of the citizens and public at large. They begin to believe that everyone is an offender since there are higher encounters with felonious people at night.

Officers who work the night shift for prolonged periods of time experience a higher rate of health issues. Health issues associated with working nights can lead to sleep disorders, high blood pressure, digestive disorders, heart issues, and depression (Schumacker, 2019). These health concerns while present on the shift or later in life should concern everyone. In a study by Costa and Silva (2019) it was found that police officer's social relationships suffer due to shift work. It further found that officers working night shift negatively impacted parental relationship and guidance. Departments can help curb these issues by setting up a rotating position schedule within the department.

In the early 2000's, most police departments were on an eight-hour schedule. This reduced forced overtime allowing officers to have more time off. Although this schedule benefits both the officers and department it does have other unintended consequences. Officer's pick shifts based on seniority. This has caused shifts to become segregated by tenure which often leave one or more shifts lacking in knowledge and experience. For example, Farmers Branch Police Department has four patrol shifts, two days and two-night shifts. The day shifts have officers ranging in average experience of four to twenty-two years of service and the night shifts have average experience of less than four years. Night shift officers typically do not have the benefit of having more experienced peers to collaborate with and the value associated with tenure. This forces them to rely on their supervisor more often when handling

certain calls. Some officers are reluctant to ask a supervisor for direction and input fearing it may diminish their perceived abilities to the department and could hamper their chances of promoting.

Criminal investigations and other specialty jobs (narcotics, juvenile, and traffic) are often left in their position until they choose to move or retire. Leaving people in a position until they choose to change positions or retire creates its own unique set of problems. They become content with their work schedule and decide to forego any promotional test. When an officer is promoted their seniority starts over with each rank causing them to lose their current schedules and work less than desirable shifts. When they forego promotions, they do not pass their knowledge, skills, and experience on to other officers. Specialty units that work together for long periods of time often have an “us versus them” mentality (Gabor, 1999). They may also suffer from groupthink. Groupthink is when a small cohesive group accepts a conclusion representing a perceived group or consensus (Schmidt, 2016). Groupthink can be harmful to law enforcement agencies and their investigations (McGill, 2017). Essentially, there is no opposing view, which can often help with investigations and allow the agency to move forward with innovative solutions.

Retention is another issue facing police departments and rotating positions could be the key to keeping officers engaged in the department. Police agencies who hire people with no experience spend a substantial amount of money to have them trained. The Farmers Branch Police Department, for example, will pay a recruit while they are in the academy and pay for the academy tuition (City of Farmers Branch, 2020). The current price of the academy at the North Central Texas Council of Government's police



academy is \$1300.00 (North Central Texas Council of Government, 2020). The average salary for a new hire for the Farmers Branch Police Department is \$65,574.00 the first year (City of Farmers Branch, 2020). This is a total of \$66,874.00 the city invests in a new officer before they count as manpower. Since the city incurs significant expenses, they must find a way to keep officers from leaving and going to another department.

When the organization has a planned rotation schedule, officers would understand their position is temporary. The department could keep the officers involved by consistently learning new jobs within the organization. Rotating positions would accomplish several different goals. First, it will keep the officer engaged which would help with retention. Secondly, it also allows the officer to reach their full potential and further their career development. Finally, rotating positions would also strengthen the organization because it would allow the department to rely on more than one person to know a job.

A well-planned rotational position schedule can help strengthen a police agency in the following ways. The more an officer knows and understands the department, the more valuable they are. For example, when officers are assigned to one area for too long, they lose sight of the responsibilities and goals of the agency's mission. Officers need to believe they are critical component to a successful agency. Opening different roles within the organization will enhance the department's functions. Reiter (2019) states that employee retention is tied to employee development. Rotating assignments and shifts can help strengthen the department and enhance the officer's career.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

One argument against rotating positions is that senior officers believe they have earned the right to pick their assignment. Picking shifts by seniority is a legitimate

argument; but how far should an agency let this dictate how they fill shifts. They have earned enough tenure to choose a schedule that is more conducive to family and social life. In patrol, officers select their shifts by seniority. Seniority should be one of the mechanisms in placing employees on a shift but should not override an officer's skillset (Shiftwork Solutions, 2018). There are glaring holes and lack of experience on some shifts. When filling a shift, administration should consider each officer's experience, knowledge, and skill set. This model would create a sense of cohesiveness among the shifts balancing out the levels of experience.

Opponents of mandatory rotation raise training questions and how it is a waste of money to train someone in a specialty unit only to send them back to patrol and forget what they have learned (Geberth, 1998). Allowing investigators to stay in a position based on specialized skills does have some merit. Criminal investigation and other specialty units, such as narcotics and juvenile division, often claim that it takes years in these units before becoming a good investigator. Geberth suggests that investigators take at least a year to learn the investigative process once assigned as a detective (1998). However, bringing their experience and knowledge back to patrol to be shared with less experienced officers is also beneficial. In all actuality, training is a continual process for all officers, not just the new officer assigned to a specialty unit. With all the new high-tech programs used in 2020 by law enforcement, officers often must be retrained every year to maintain their license (Reiter, 2019). Technology changes year to year, forcing even specialty units to be retrained. Rotating officers among the different specialty departments will ensure that the agency is not beholden to any one

officer, and it would keep the agency running smoothly if an officer decided to quit or retire (Rowley, 2013).

B.J. Pierce, a former detective, believes investigations suffer due to El Dorado County Sheriff's office rotational process (Mayer, 2012). The concern is that a new investigator may not have the same relationship with the victim when they take over a case from the original investigator. Although this can be a hindrance in some investigations, it can be successfully negated if the case is appropriately managed. More severe cases such as murder, robbery, or assault need to be handled by a more seasoned detective (Walts, 2016). Although a more seasoned detective offers insight, a rotational process within criminal investigations can help lessen the impact of a detective leaving the division. One solution would be a few months before a detective is rotated back to patrol, they can be replaced by the next senior detective to take their position. This would allow the outgoing investigator to finish up cases that are high priority and assist the investigator who took their place. The outgoing investigator would also be able to train their replacement and advise on existing cases. Supervisors review and re-assign cases when an investigator leaves and often uncovers cases that have been neglected or not thoroughly investigated. This would allow oversight and a quality control measure to ensure the quality of an investigator's work meets the agency's standards.

Another disagreement is specialty unit positions should be determined by performance and not subject to rotation. Walts (2016) believes that criminal investigation units should be staffed based on performance. He believes there should be no pre-established time limits on detectives assigned to the criminal investigation

unit (Walts, 2016). In theory, this is a good idea. This can make it incredibly hard to rotate an employee who may not be doing as good of a job as someone else. The supervisor may not even notice or purposely avoid determining the quality of work the investigator is doing.

Another debate against rotation is it negatively impacts the employee. Senior officers believe a rotation will disrupt their lives and interrupt their family life. Others depend on additional income from part time jobs which could be affected by a rotation. Fiester believes that rotating employees can have a negative effect on the employee who is rotating. This can be caused because their assignments are increased, which could cause their productivity to take a dip. However, Fiester believes that this can be controlled by successfully managing the job rotation (Fiester et al, 2008). The rotation can be done with a clear helpful transition policy for the employee who is being transferred. This would set specific timelines for all positions allowing the employee to make the necessary plans to prepare for the upcoming shift or job assignment.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Rotating positions and setting time limits on jobs is not a new idea however, it is seldom used within police departments. This can be used as a successful tool, especially in a smaller department where there is a lack of movement. The creation of a strong rotational policy will help enhance confidence, career development and promotional prospects within the organization. There are many ways to create a rotation system within an organization. Administration should review all viable options and see what best fits their department and officers.

Officers should be allowed and encouraged to move to many different areas of the department, enhancing their knowledge and experiences as they advance throughout their career. Supervisors should also be encouraged to move around the organization. Each time any employee is moved into a new role within an organization it makes the employee more knowledgeable, creates job satisfaction, and would increase the overall strength of the department.

Each agency needs to aggressively look at implementing a rotational policy for their agency. The rotation policy is not a one size fits all, the policy applied needs to fit the department it is being designed for. If done right, a rotation policy will help increase the morale of the department as well as strengthen the entire agency. It will also help with many other problems facing the agency in the form of retention. Keeping officers from long rotations on nights will also help reduce future health issues (Schumacker, 2019).

Administration should strengthen the department through rotating positions. There are several compelling reasons not to rotate positions at a department. Such as seniority or experience and contacts gained while in specialized divisions. However, the health benefits, job knowledge and moral boost that it gives officers will help strengthen the department and increase its effectiveness.

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