

Difficulties Recruiting and Retaining Officers in Northern Michigan

Lieutenant Adrian Karr, Petoskey Public Safety
Sergeant Ryan Swope, Crawford County Sheriff's Office
Captain Peter Wright, Michigan Department of Natural Resources
Deputy Chief Amanda Clough, Grayling Police Department

National Command and Staff College, Session #006

October 2019

Abstract

Northern Michigan police departments are struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified police candidates due to many factors. This article will focus on concerns such as benefits packages, social media, media bias, public perception, and cultural/gender deficiencies. Organizational leaders must address these concerns to retain a competitive advantage. In smaller police departments, such as those located in Northern Michigan, just one incident regarding questionable judgement could result in a tarnished organizational reputation. Recruiting and retention of quality officers is an important step in avoiding these potential pitfalls and key to maintaining a highly functioning police organization. Northern Michigan police administrators, who understand the importance of balancing the needs of the community while addressing employee satisfaction, will succeed in enhancing their organization through personnel recruitment and retention. Contained in this research paper are recommendations to address and transform these areas of concern.

Difficulties Recruiting and Retaining Officers in Northern Michigan

Northern Michigan police departments struggle to recruit and retain highly desired police candidates due to factors such as pay, competitive benefit packages, a negative social climate and lack of leadership. This research paper focuses on the difficulties and challenges of recruitment and retention of officers and offers suggestions for Northern Michigan police organizations to be competitive in the process. If not properly addressed, topics discussed herein can individually cripple the functionality of a police organization. Identifying and addressing the areas in which a department might be vulnerable is a direct challenge for organizational administrators. Agencies who succeed in addressing areas of weakness will procure a competitive advantage over other agencies vying for these same highly qualified police candidates.

Leadership is vital to an organization's success. "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences individuals or a group of people through effective communication to achieve a shared outcome or goal." (Long, 2017, module 7) Leadership will assist in the recruiting process by articulating the nobility of the profession and displaying a professional image to desired candidates. The process for recognizing and developing personnel with leadership qualities is not only crucial for recruiting purposes, but it is also essential to gain the trust and respect of the public. Creating relationships and diversifying organizational members can ease tension and present opportunities for organizational growth. These qualities are attractive to candidates looking to be part of a bigger purpose.

Cost of Living and Stress in Northern Michigan

Working as a law enforcement officer in Northern Michigan can be a deterrent for some officers. Northern Michigan has a stigma for having low call volume, smaller pool of call diversity, minimal opportunity for promotion and smaller opportunities for advanced training. “The top three things officers are looking for in a department are community police relationships, promotional opportunities and benefits/retirement.” (Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, 2017, p. 164) Southern Michigan Police Departments can offer higher pay, better benefits, a defined benefit, and healthcare upon retirement. For this reason, organizational leaders in Northern Michigan must stress other benefits such as low crime rate, family atmosphere, and outdoor activities in order to draw highly desired candidates to their agencies.

Living in Southern Michigan may come with a cost of higher taxes and longer work commutes, but the convenience of shopping, nightlife, and dining is a big draw. Hiring an individual that is accustomed to the convenience of a superstore a couple miles down the road can have a hard time transitioning into having to drive 30 minutes for the same service. With the growth of technology, Northern Michigan receives the same shipping promises that companies offer individuals in Southern Michigan. Which means whatever you need is only a click away and will be at your doorstep within a couple days.

Northern Michigan is limited on what it can offer to individuals when it comes to time off. If the individual does not enjoy outdoor activities, he or she may find himself or herself having nothing to do on their off days. The winters can be very long, with large amounts of snow, extremely cold, with minimal sunshine adding to the potential of depression. On the other hand, the individuals that enjoy the outdoors, opportunities are endless. Summers provide many

opportunities for water sports, hiking, camping, fishing, campfires and beach life. The winter season offers hunting, ice fishing, downhill skiing, snowmobiling, ice-skating, and snowshoeing.

Collective Bargaining

Police administrators must keep in mind that highly desired police candidates could be attracted to career-oriented organizations in which they will be able to provide for their families and still retire at a reasonable age. Northern Michigan police administrators must focus efforts on maintaining and/or increasing benefits during collective bargaining to remain competitive with Southern Michigan police agencies. Keeping pace with Southern Michigan agencies is difficult but necessary in order to recruit and retain police officers in Northern Michigan.

Twenty years ago, police officers starting into the profession could count on health care upon retirement, a defined benefit program, and annual pay increases. Today's officers must position themselves to obtain employment after retirement. Further, police officers today are asked to do more with less. Recently, there has been a push to have resource officers in all schools after an increase in school shootings. This is an outstanding idea; however, administrators have no idea how funding will be obtained. Many police organizations in Northern Michigan are still trying to get back to level of personnel numbers that existed prior to the economic crash of 2008. Administrators are in a very tough spot and could easily jeopardize their department's reputation by stretching themselves too thin. By increasing the number of department employees, an administrator will decrease the funds available to provide benefits to current employees. Less desired candidates will apply for employment, which in turn will increase liability and create an environment for an elevated turnover rate. This is a very slippery slope that needs to be considered by organizational administrators. Every effort must be made to

keep pace with benefit packages offered to officers in Southern Michigan in order to combat recruiting and turnover rates in Northern Michigan.

In order to attract qualified police candidates as well as keep current employees, administrators and police officer labor councils must negotiate contracts every three years, (unless agreed on a longer/shorter timeframe). These contracts define such benefits as hourly wage, retirement, health benefits, time off, and educational benefits. Police personnel and organizational administrators need to assess organizational health, department functionality, and monetary trends prior to entering into contract negotiations.

Organizational administrators try to minimize spending in an attempt to maintain financial organizational health, while police bargaining units attempt to remain competitive within the industry. According to Osorio (2015), "Seeking to influence public officials in order to gain greater benefits for their members is one of their core functions" (p. 690). These negotiated benefits play a big role in the process of recruiting and retaining highly desired police candidates in Northern Michigan. Creating a competitive bargaining package has the potential to pull a large variety of potential candidates to the organization including those from neighboring agencies.

Organizational Diversification

When addressing the recruiting and retention of police in Northern Michigan it is important to consider, cultural and gender deficiencies. Organizations need to evaluate their community's makeup in regard to ethnicity and gender to better serve the community and their needs and to promote community trust. The goal of Northern Michigan police departments is to be able to competitively recruit and retain top officers while further addressing cultural and gender diversification.

Women are becoming more of a necessity in a male dominated profession. “Women represent 14% of the law enforcement workforce in Michigan with the number remaining small and rate of increase slow” (Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, 2017, p. 66). Some of the issues that have affected recruiting and retaining females in law enforcement include family related issues like pregnancy and childcare, sexual and gender harassment, and outdated performance evaluations that are not community-oriented policing friendly.

So why is it important to incorporate women in the workforce? Research has found that in the United States and internationally that, “Women police officers rely on a style of policing that uses less physical force. They are better at defusing and de-escalating potentially violent confrontations with citizens and less likely to become involved in problems with use of excessive force. Additionally, women officers often possess better communication skills than their male counterparts and are better able to facilitate the cooperation and trust required to implement a community policing model” (Harrington, 2001, p. 22). Further, women respond more effectively to women officers when involved in incidents such as domestic violence. Addressing the hiring and retention of women in law enforcement is therefore an effective way to address issues in regards to use of force and citizen complaints.

Some suggestions for increasing recruitment of women in law enforcement are for agencies to create advertisements that are female orientated. Further, removing obstacles in the selection process that could potentially play a part in disqualifying competent candidates, and a redesign of training and getting away from the military style of training. Retention can further be improved by creating a mentoring program, implementing family friendly policies, and prevention of sexual/gender harassment.

Law enforcement administrators must look at diversification of personnel as a way to communicate with different ethnic groups within their communities. Embracing the importance of culture will give officers a better understanding of different viewpoints. Further, by diversifying an organization, members are provided resources to better understand cultural viewpoints. It is projected that if the trend of growing minorities continues, minorities in the next fifteen years will represent nearly 40 percent of Michigan's population as opposed to only 25 percent currently (Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, 2017, p. 64). This statistic strengthens the need for agency leaders to address organizational diversification.

Communities in Northern Michigan are becoming more diverse as people of ethnic backgrounds continue to migrate away from larger cities. Making an effort to understand different cultures and viewpoints will assist in strengthening community relationships. The US Department of Justice states, "According to conventional wisdom among police leaders, nonwhites are likelier than whites to associate police with the civil rights abuses of years gone by and with present-day bias and unequal treatment, including racial and ethnic profiling. Some nonwhites may view policing as a white-dominated and racist profession and may reject the idea of working for the police because they fear being perceived by their peers as selling out" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009, p. 33). Recruitment and retention of minorities could be improved through outreach by organizations, peer recruitment through role models within their agency, creating an inviting work environment for minorities and the prevention of workplace harassment and discrimination.

Media Effects

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted by the National Police Research Platform, "Eight-in-ten officers who work in agencies of over 100 sworn officers say

that in general, the media treat the policing profession unfairly” (Gramlich & Parker, 2017, para. 2). For police, attitudes about media bias are linked to other feelings about their jobs. For example, officers who feel strongly that the media treat them unfairly are more likely to state that their work leaves them feeling frustrated, disconnected and sometimes angry. The seeds of this trend can be traced back to 2009 in which a white police officer arrested Professor Henry Louis Gates, a black Harvard professor. “The response by President Obama, prior to knowing the facts, served to influence and encourage negative reporting by the media.” (Morelli, 2015, para. 16) In 2012, the controversial shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman further inflamed race relations and the media narrative that police officers are racist and unjust began to resonate. The shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson in 2014, kicked off days of rioting, looting, and protests. This left the country reeling and the media reporting that followed did little to quell the unrest. Further fueling tensions regarding police actions was the death of Freddie Gray in 2015. According to Wear, Zarconi, Aultman, Chyatte, and Kumagai (2017), “Gray was arrested, cuffed with his hands behind his back, restrained with leg irons, and placed without proper safety restraints into a police van” (p. 1). Gray repeatedly informed officers he was having trouble breathing; however, his verbal requests were ignored, and he later died at a hospital in Maryland.

These incidents had a direct impact on community and police relationships. Ultimately, the American people began to view police officers in a negative light and the law enforcement profession has been battling this perception ever since.

Public Perception

According to the Media's War on Police Officers, "The problem with the media calling police officers racist is that the American people are starting to believe that police officers actively seek out black people to arrest or harass them" (Morelli, 2015, para. 13) Today, the public's distrust of police officers is felt everywhere. The mainstream media (news stations and newspapers), when reporting on police misconduct or violence, often play up the race of the police officer and the "victim" and make that an important part of the story. They tend to downplay the facts about the actual cases and fail to remain objective. If citizens could hear what happened, based purely on the facts and form an opinion without the influence of the mainstream media, they would more than likely have formed a different opinion.

The internet, social media in particular, has been universally available since the early 1990's. It has grown to the point that the use of the internet is a part of everyday life. Unfortunately, constraints are lacking when it comes to social media and one can post anything, no matter how provocative or false, without fear of repercussions. The anonymous online environment encourages inflammatory rhetoric and behavior that would never be condoned or tolerated if done in person. Furthermore, doxing and the ability to obtain a police officer's private information is a relatively simple process and is an emerging threat to law enforcement officers.

There is no question that policing in today's world is inherently more challenging. Today's officers face more scrutiny than ever before. According to Captain Gwendolyn Waters, "The combination of factors such as narcissism, anonymity, lack of restraint, copycat behavior, crowd mentality, and lack of a cooling off period makes social media a uniquely significant force" (Waters, 2012, para. 8). Social media has significantly increased officers' community

exposure as police often are surrounded by cameras and amateur reporters, who selectively broadcast every action and their opinion of it to a worldwide audience due to social media and the available technology. This caustic environment has a negative impact on those willing to enter public service.

Improving Perception, Hiring, and Retention

A way to improve community perception is through visibility. Visibility and a law enforcement presence in the community, in a non-enforcement setting are two important ways to improve police-community relations. Not only can this strengthen partnerships, but it demonstrates to the public that their issues matter. Further, engaging residents in one-on-one encounters and work to establish one-on-one professional relationships with community members and businesses. This can strengthen ties and build trust.

Many agencies have put an emphasis on positive encounters with youth and juveniles, primarily through school programs. In addition to reduced bullying, personal safety, and drug abuse, officers can create positive relationships at an early age and provide a foundation for future recruiting and hiring efforts. Northern Michigan departments have shown an increase in the use of social media in order to increase community-police relationships, accountability, and transparency. By utilizing Facebook, and departmental homepages, agencies can give residents a platform to voice concerns and the agency can offer crime prevention tips and improve the overall perception of the agency within the community. Another way law enforcement agencies are enhancing public perception concerns is through engagement programs, such as the Neighborhood Watch program and citizen's academies. These programs provide positive social contacts that will improve and strengthen police-community relationships in their area.

The Role of Leadership

Leaders are not born, but rather, formed through experience and training to manage organizational teams. Magnanimous leaders share virtues associated with that of a strong moral compass. “Magnanimous leaders possess virtues such as, truthfulness, integrity, honor, nobility, humility, content, faithfulness, respect, responsibility, prudence and gratitude.” (Hoina, 2017, section 3.3) Good organizational leaders empower employees by encouraging autonomy and participation to accomplish the department’s mission. The importance for sound leadership has never been more paramount than in contemporary society. As Bolman and Deal (2013) clearly state, “Leaders cannot escape their responsibility to track budgets, motivate people, respond to political pressures, and attend to culture, but they serve a deeper and more enduring role if they are models and catalysts for values like excellence, caring, justice, and faith” (p.407). Agencies must have the ability to identify and promote these magnanimous leaders.

Police organizations throughout Northern Michigan that currently employ these leaders have a strategic advantage over neighboring agencies. Word travels fast throughout the employee pool grapevine of the most desired police agencies in Northern Michigan. By addressing personnel needs and departmental culture, this elite list becomes more attractive to highly desired police candidates and further increases odds of employee retention.

The leadership abilities of police administrators and organizations that choose to invest in the care and development of their employees play a positive role in recruiting and retention. Care and development would include monetary compensation, vacation time, health care packages, retirement benefits, training and top-notch technology. Police organizations who address these employee concerns do not have to spend as much time recruiting candidates. Highly attractive

and motivated officers will be eager to apply. Police officers throughout Michigan feel they are connected through occupational hazards and functions. Police officers love to get together at trainings and/or social events where they discuss their respective department's strengths and weaknesses. In these atmospheres, opinions of departmental dysfunction and employee treatment travel fast! Having leaders who possess a strong moral compass in the correct positions within the organizational structure can pay dividends toward recruitment of police officers.

Conclusion

Recruiting into the law enforcement profession is more challenging than ever before. Although the private sector can offer more attractive benefit and retirement packages, many applicants are attracted by the sense of purpose and service law enforcement agencies can offer to their community. Because of this, agencies should emphasize their brand and promote the nobility of the profession.

Police candidates directly out of a police academy are looking for communities where they can make a good wage and have decent health benefits to take care of their families. Northern Michigan communities are very attractive to candidates who have these goals in mind. Financial personnel must ensure through investing and collective bargaining that there is a balance between funding personnel and providing necessary services to community residents. Officers must keep in mind their wages and benefits are a large portion of a community's budget but cannot be the only expenditure for a community to be progressive.

Diversity in the workforce is desirable for an agency to function at its maximum capacity. Diversity should not be limited to the concept of solely reaching out to minority groups, it should also be considered in a larger sense. Organizational diversity should look beyond race and

include community members with a wide range of backgrounds, life experiences, worldviews, and social identity.

Recruiting practices should target a wide variety of perspectives and life experiences and recruiters need to have a universal understanding of the meaning of workplace diversity. Hiring strategies that are time consuming and complex can cause job seekers to lose interest in a particular agency and look elsewhere for employment. In addition, recruiters should show a genuine interest in potential employees and let them know that who they are matters to the agency. Accordingly, the nobility of the profession should be marketed, and recruiters should identify ways to sustain interest of those who may be the best fit for their agency.

References

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2013). *Reframing organizations* (5th ed.). 1 Montgomery Street, Suite 2100, San Francisco, CA 94104: Jossey-Bass.
- Gramlich, J., & Parker, K. (2017). *Majority of police officers say they are mistreated by media*. Retrieved from, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/25/most-officers-say-the-media-treat-police-unfairly/>
- Harrington, P. E. (2001). *Recruiting and retaining women a self-assessment guide for law enforcement*. Retrieved from, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/185235.pdf>
- Hoina, C. (2017). *Virtues of magnanimous officer* [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://cloud.scorm.com/content/courses/NAGVXPB5E6/VirtuesofMagnanimousOfficersd4ba9327-1f01-4558-8c81-5471e0baa6cd/0/uindexIms.html>
- Long, L. (2017). *Effective communication part 1* [Video file]. Retrieved from cloud.scorm.com/content/courses/NAGVXPB5E6/EffectiveCommunication40a1ee90-86db-429a-a2bd-dfc495f6845b/7/index_Ims.html
- Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards. (2017). *Fostering public trust in law enforcement in Michigan*. Retrieved from, www.michigan.gov/documents/mcoles/fostering_public_trust_in_law_enforcement_may_1_2017_575657_7.pdf
- Morelli, A. (2015, December 23). *The media's war on police officers*. Retrieved from <https://www.theodesseyonline.com/medias-war-police-officers>
- Osorio, I. (2015). Government against itself: public union power and its consequences. *Cato Journal*, 690-695. Retrieved from, https://search-proquest-com.cmich.idm.oclc.org/docview/1717344117?accountid=10181&rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2009). *Law enforcement recruitment toolkit-recruiting for diversity*. Retrieved from <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Recruitmenttoolkit.pdf>
- Waters, G. (2012, November 1). Social media and law enforcement. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. Retrieved from, <https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/social-media-and-law-enforcement>
- Wear, D., Zarconi, J., Aultman, J., Chyatte, M. R., & Kumagai, A. K. (2017). Remembering Freddie gray: medical education for social justice. *Academic Medicine*, 92, 312-317.