

Law Enforcement National Training and Certification Standards

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Abstract

There is a lack of consistency within the training and certification of law enforcement both regionally and nationally which can pose a critical issue facing law enforcement today. Law enforcement must improve its delivery of consistent and relevant services and should mandate nation-wide certification standards, training programs, and oversight of unethical officers. By addressing the level of training and bringing a nation-wide certification for law enforcement officers and agencies, the quality, professionalism, and accountability within law enforcement across the nation will overall improve. This research will compare and contrast current training and certification standards currently in place, discuss a national database available to agencies, examine successes in national training programs in the private and public sectors, and provide a plan of action for bringing a national level of training and certification to law enforcement across the country.

Introduction

In 2020 there were two high-profile officer involved incidents that led to an uptick in the public's distrust in the law enforcement field. The main case in 2020, which was highly publicized, was the death of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin (Ortiz, 2020). After the death of George Floyd many communities around the United States saw a lot of civil unrest as many citizens rioted in the streets. Activists across America called for police reform due to claims of racial and systemic injustice within the criminal justice system. In turn, the law enforcement field saw the lowest level of public confidence in American history.

Following the civil unrest, a 2020 survey conducted by Gallop showed that public's confidence in law enforcement is at 48 percent, which is a national record low (Ortiz, 2020). This lower level of confidence in law enforcement was stirred by a series of officer use of force instances across America. Many measures have been put into place to increase police accountability which in turn should increase public trust. Some of those measures include implementing body-worn cameras, removing qualified-immunity, and requiring documentation of citizen contacts. Although these many steps have been taken to increase accountability, it is our contention that police officer training standards and certification is one major area that has been overlooked.

The purpose of this research is to address the need for improved training standards in the law enforcement profession. Our research will show the inconsistencies around the U.S. for the required qualifications, training curriculum, and training length it takes to become a police officer. This research will also recommend a plan of action to implement nation-wide standards

for entry level training and certification. Along with the plan of action, we will discuss current media technology that will assist in ensuring successful implementation of national certification.

Problems in Law Enforcement Training

Often when people are asked how law enforcement as a whole can improve the typical response is more or better training. As this is such a quick response from average citizens it raises an important question; how much training do officers actually get? According to Dr. Jason Armstrong (2020) the average police academy in the U.S. is about 840 hours over a 21-week period. This amount of time varies and is dictated by each state peace officer standards and training agency. Some states such as Georgia only require 408 hours of training when others such as Maryland require up to 1,168 hours of training through a police academy (Armstrong, 2020).

After the academy, officers usually enter into a field training program, where they are partnered with a senior officer as they gain on the job training and experience. These programs typically last around 14 weeks, or 560 hours. Therefore, the average officer receives 1400 hours of training through the academy and the field training program prior to working a solo assignment. Although this can seem like a decent amount of time, other professions' certification requirements show that law enforcement standards might be lacking. Armstrong (2020) explains that most states require a person wanting to become a plumber to spend two to four years as an apprentice with between 3,000 and 8,500 hours of training before receiving a certification.

So, what does this mean about law enforcement training standards? Do police officers receive enough training and experience at the beginning of their careers to be successful? Are officers receiving the right training for their career? We believe that if these comparison numbers are shown to members of the public, they would probably answer "no" to those previous

questions. As we mentioned earlier, there is a demand from the public for police officers to be held more accountable for their actions during their enforcement of laws. The first step in holding officers accountable and improving the trust in policing around the U.S. is to address the problems discussed in training.

Compare and Contrast State Standards

For the purpose of our research we decided to compare and contrast the Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) standards for three states: Maryland, Georgia and Colorado. The rationale behind these states is as follow: Maryland requires the most amount of training hours, Georgia requires the least number of training hours, and Colorado is our POST requirements. For this section we will be evaluating the current training hours requirement, required training topics, and other requirements for each state. The goal is to identify the wide variety of standards for becoming a police officer to show the importance and benefit of implementing nation-wide training and certification standards for law enforcement.

Maryland

Currently the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions require a total of 1,168 hours of training in an academy setting before someone can obtain certification as a police officer. Among the required training topics are; firearms, driving, terrorism, health and wellness, protective strategies and tactics, crisis intervention, state law and constitutional law (MDLE.net, n.d.). The requirements to attend a Maryland police academy are; at least 21 years old, U.S. citizen, have a valid driver's license, and possess a high school diploma or GED.

Georgia

In comparison, Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) currently requires 11 weeks of training for a total of 408 hours. Recruits in Georgia will attend one of seven

regional training academies which will cover both classroom content as well as the practical skills such as firearms, driving and arrest control (Georgia Police Academy, 2021). The minimum requirements to attend the police academy are; 18 years old, a U.S. citizen, have a high school diploma or equivalent, and not have been convicted by any state or by the federal government of any crime the punishment for which could have been imprisonment in the federal or state prison or institution nor have been convicted of enough misdemeanors to establish a pattern of disregard for the law.

Colorado

Finally, we will evaluate the current standards in Colorado. The Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) has set a requirement of a minimum basic curriculum of 556 hours. This requirement is met through an agency sponsored or self-sponsored police academy. The required curriculum covered in the academies is broken down as followed: 378 hours of academic, 62 hours of arrest control, 44 hours of driving, and 72 hours of firearms for the total of 556 hours (Colorado Department of Law, n.d.). Colorado POST recognizes that all academies in the state currently exceed this requirement. The State of Colorado also requires the recruit is 21 years old, has a valid driver's license, possesses a high school diploma or GED, and has not been convicted of a felony or domestic violence charge.

As we have found through the research of the different states, there are wide differences in the required training hours, hiring requirements, and curriculum taught at each academy. We propose that the best way to address and improve these inconsistencies is to implement a nationwide training and certification standard for all law enforcement officers. This process has already begun through the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST), which has developed a national certification program for law enforcement

continuing education. This national certification is a great program available for all state POST boards to adopt and participate in. Our suggestion is to build upon and expand on this current system to include establishing police academy entry, curriculum, and length requirements.

National Database

To ensure a smooth implementation of a national training and certification for all law enforcement, a nation-wide database would have to be utilized. As it stands now, IADLEST operates a database called the National Decertification Index (NDI). The NDI serves as a national registry of certificate or license revocation actions relating to officer misconduct (*About Ndi*, n.d.). This system is a great tool to enhance the accountability of officers. If an officer has their certification revoked by the state they are currently working in, and the officer applied to be a police officer in another state, any agency would be able to look-up their current certification status through the NDI. Thus, the de-certified officer would not be able to obtain another law enforcement position anywhere in the country.

For the purposes of this research, we recommend using similar software to create a National Certification Database. This would allow each state to enter officers' certification information into the database along with an updated log of all trainings they have received. This database will allow officers' certifications to follow them if they decide to change agencies, even if it is in a different state. Colorado POST has a similar database system called "Benchmark". Through this system, every officer in the state of Colorado has all their training certifications tracked, and their law enforcement certification verified through POST.

IADLEST maintains a professional staff dedicated to examining training programs and instructors from around the country. Peggy Schaefer was recently interviewed regarding how IADLEST works and the necessity of such a program. Their goal is to work with state POST

boards to examine current training programs and provide guidance on how to improve when necessary. Furthermore, IADLEST shares statewide standards from academies and in-service training to help jurisdictions improve their training as they compare their instruction with other states on similar topics (Nee & Schaefer, 2022).

In 2015, IADLEST created the national certification program to assess the validity and content of what was being taught to police officers. However, this is a voluntary program and there is no requirement for states to dictate trainers to have a validated course. We suggest each POST board mandate all instructors and all classes to be certified by IADLEST before allowing the topics to be taught. This is vitally important as IADLEST requires instructors have a detailed lesson plan while also considering a variety of adult learning principles be used within the training program (Nee & Schaefer, 2022). There are far too many examples of retired or currently employed officers promoting their side business of instructing, while providing little content of value. Even with a national program, it would be necessary to have on-going evaluations of each course and instructor for continued accountability to the lessons being taught.

Standardized Training Successes

There will likely be pushback from many agencies on the input of local and cultural differences within a national training program. Local, regional, state, national and international training has been in existence for decades and has seen a great deal of success in the private sector. Adapting varying cultural principles, theories and concepts of training has been accomplished by international businesses in a manner that allows for local understanding and application (Morical & Tsai, 1992). These minor variances allow for regional context while maintaining the core content of the training. The difference is not in the objectives of the training but in how it is presented and explained to meet the needs of the local users.

Recently, Ziggi's Coffee took the Town of Mead on a tour of their new headquarters. The owner explained how their coffee brand has expanded from a local favorite to a multi-state brand. On the first floor of their headquarters, is a large room designed specifically for their training. All new franchisees are required to attend training sessions on how to make Ziggi's coffee by using exact standards and requirements.

Ziggi's takes this a step further by utilizing a media specialist who creates step-by-step training videos on how to make the perfectly blended drink, whether it be a cup of coffee, a smoothie, or a specialized blend. They do not leave room for error. They expect their customers in Kansas to receive the exact specialized drink as their customer in Colorado. Law enforcement could learn multiple lessons from the plethora of successful training programs within national and international businesses.

Focusing specifically on public safety, fire services already participate in national certification and training programs. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) regulates training, codes, and responses to major incidents. This organization works collectively to streamline how fire and emergency medical services handle a large variety of circumstances. Having conversed with leaders from three Northern Colorado Front Range fire departments, they all agree the nationalization of training and certification has created a streamlined and effective process. As fire fighters move from department to department, they know exactly what certifications each has and brings to the agency and know what base-line training exists. Fire services also acknowledged the benefits and ability to train above the national requirements and alongside regional partners.

Implementation

Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) from each state must adhere to national guidelines of training and certification requirements. In turn, POST must hold each agency accountable to follow the newly created standards. This is a significant change from the freedom that Colorado, specifically, has seen in training requirements. Until 2015, Colorado POST had no mandated training or certification requirements for duly sworn officers. Each law enforcement agency could offer, mandate, or ignore training in the manner they each saw appropriate. This allowed for haphazard organization and planning of valuable lessons. There was no requirement to track training, create lesson plans, have specified objectives, outcomes, or goals.

If POST transitions to a national certification process, this change at the state level will impact each organization within the state. Leadership will need to promote versatility of the training cadre by facilitating development stages. Planning realistic action steps to achieve the goals of having localized training meeting national criteria will take time to develop. Accomplishing this requires leaders to create strategic activities, timelines for completion, how to maintain accountability throughout the process, identifying needed resources, and evaluating successes and areas for improvement (Anderson, Gisborne, & Holliday, 2017). This process will need to occur in conjunction with POST and with a degree of patience and perpetual communication. One such proposal for this implementation is seen in Figure 1.

The most significant changes will be seen at the academy level, where POST will hold accountable each instructor to follow national standards. This may be a significant change for many. John Kotter is one of the most prolific researchers on implementing change and his theories should be considered. Additionally, research by Molloy and Whittington (2005) showed

two very important components of change are involving employees and deploying effective communication (White & Robinson, 2014). In law enforcement, personalities generally exist in which people are resistant to changing what appears to be successful and officers do not like to be told what to do. Therefore, communicating the need for change based on changing environmental, political, and national influences will take tact and specificity. This must include the right people communicating how the objectives of POST align with the agency vision while also considering future challenges (Ellis & Javidi, 2017). In essence, the message should be conveyed that national standardization of our profession is necessary to assuage the fears many people have of rogue officers receiving minimal training.

Certification of State Mandated Training

Strategy	Timeline	Accountability	Resources	Evaluation
Coordinate with Academy Instructors	July 1, 2022- April 2023	POST Board	IADLEST certification	All courses certified nationally
Implement new training standards	Fall Semester 2023	Academy Director		Survey after courses completed by students and instructors
In-Service Training Standards	July 1, 2022- May 2023	POST Board / SME	IADLEST, DOJ, COPS, IACP	Certify In- Service Training
In-Service	July 1, 2023	POST	POST	Survey to all law

Training Implementation		Compliance Office	Presentations	enforcement agencies
In-Service Training	Ongoing	POST Compliance		Needs assessment

Figure 1

Promoting deep change such as nationalized training requirements will necessitate a coordinated front from a variety of leaders at all levels of the profession. Self-awareness of current issues is one of the most prevalent means of initiating the conversation. Few in the profession of law enforcement can argue there are no concerns or issues within the profession. There is always room for improvement. According to Dearborn (2002), “Accepting that much of the competence building which impacts effective leadership taps into our emotional domains may be the first hurdle as we build learning strategies” (p. 527). Therefore, the value of self-awareness in building our profession into a competent, respected, and defensible career is unquestionable. Organizations such as International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), Department of Justice (DOJ), and Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) should have a coordinated effort to recognize the issues that law enforcement faces and the desire to bring about nationally recognized changes.

Funding requirements are minimal as IADLEST already exists and does not require payment to certify training programs and instructors. They are a fully funded organization and exist to aid governments in implementing professional and well-designed programs. Smaller agencies will feel the impact over larger agencies as officers tend to have multiple roles within a smaller organization. An instructor of defensive tactics may also teach less-lethal and firearms. The financial impact could arise as the needs to respond to calls could delay the ability to create

training objectives and plans meeting the guidelines of IADLEST. It will require the need to bolster staffing, allow for delays, or require overtime to meet deadlines. Local leaders must have a coordinated front working with regional partners and POST officials to develop training that meets the needs of individual communities. The local level implementation of national standardization should take effect after the state changes occur to see where gaps exist and learn from larger successes and failures.

Role of Leadership

As mentioned earlier, to be able to successfully implement a national certification and training standards for all law enforcement will require a deep change throughout the entire profession. Leaders have taken minor steps to improve the accountability of officers with the methods such as body-worn cameras, citizen contact forms, and holding more trainings. However, these methods are seen as incremental changes, which are limited in scope and viewed as easily reversed back to the “old way” (Long, 2021). Incremental changes are not going to lead to any results when it comes to changing the overall culture and professionalism in law enforcement. This type of change needs to be what Dr. Long (2021) refers to as deep change.

Deep change is much more difficult to achieve, is major in scope, irreversible and includes risk-taking (Long, 2021). Often times this type of change is very unsettling for officers and staff members; however, it will be beneficial to all in the end. The deep change will need to start at the lowest level with local sheriff offices and police departments who can voice their support for a national certification and training standards requirements. Each agency can explain why moving to national standards for law enforcement training is crucial for the future of policing. We also believe that each state’s POST will need to hold the same level of deep change and change their current certification requirements to the national level.

Conclusion

Schaefer stated, “There are over 800 tasks that officers have to perform perfectly” (Nee & Schaefer, 2022). This statement alone holds a lot of weight on the importance of training for police officers. Although training within the law enforcement field has made major strides over the last couple of decades, there is still room for improvement. It is surprising that there has not been a nationally coordinated effort to improve the training requirements as well as the certification requirements for police officers. IADLEST has begun to pave the way for a national level of training certification, but there needs to be more organizational leaders that step up to implement this level of training standards.

By implementing a national level of training and certification, police officers all across the U.S. will perform at a higher proficiency. This in turn will bring better relationships between police departments and the communities they serve. With a national certification and decertification index database, the level of accountability will also rise. It is our belief, the plan of action presented in this research will allow for the successful implementation of a national training and certification practices for law enforcement.

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