

**Recruitment and Retention in Public Safety**

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## RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN PUBLIC SAFETY

### **Abstract**

Employee recruitment and retention are significant concerns facing public safety professions. With declining numbers of applicants and employees leaving the profession, we have seen firsthand how turnover affects employee morale, as well as budgets, and the level of knowledge that comes with having employees with experience. It also impacts community relations and trust when community members have built a relationship with officers serving their community and those officers have moved on to other agencies or professions and those relationships need to be rebuilt with new members of the agency. Our paper will discuss the benefit of retaining employees and the positive impact that derives from the retention efforts to include financial benefits, increased community trust and an increase in job satisfaction. Additionally, initiatives for positive retention such as mental health programs, enhanced benefits and reclassification can positively impact 911 telecommunicators, as well as how recruiting relates to retention and succession planning.

## **Introduction**

Recruitment and retention should be at the forefront of every leader's mind. As the number of interested and qualified applicants in the public safety fields have decreased, it is imperative that focus is placed on not only hiring qualified candidates but also on retaining those candidates within your agency.

Finding the right candidate during the hiring process is the first step to focus on retention. Using a recruitment approach that focuses on the culture of the agency will increase the probability of retaining an officer (Orrick, 2018). There are multiple different ways to approach recruiting officers that will be discussed. Once a quality recruit is attracted, the interview process should have a focus on the culture of the agency to confirm that the candidate is a good fit.

Reclassification of 911 Public Safety Telecommunicators (PST) to align their job classification more closely to the work that they do and increasing their pension benefits at retirement is a positive step that should be taken to increase the number and quality of applicants to the profession. Wellness programs directly affect the recruiting and retention of public safety professionals within an agency. Agencies that implement wellness programs within their organizations are more effective and have a greater community connection. Agencies are also implementing critical incident training to combat the growing demand for de-escalation within the communities. This is also helping with the community relationships. Public safety professionals are being drawn to these agencies due to the great personal care that they provide for the public safety professional and the community support for the agency (Rhodes, 2024).

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Financial planning for agencies to recruit and retain officers is an important aspect when hiring a new employee; employers spend time and money to hire an employee with the intention of retaining them with the hope of making an impact on the community. When an employee is retained, they will be well known throughout the community, which will have a positive influence and build community trust.

Succession planning plays a large part in recruitment and retention, starting with intentionally hiring the right employees and then retaining and developing those employees throughout their career so the agency can continue a successful path.

### **Recruiting to Retain Officers**

The first step in retaining officers is to hire the right people. Hiring the right people requires a department's recruiting strategy to be one that actively seeks officers that fit the culture and brand of the agency. Culture can be defined as the way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization (Therwanger, 2017). This culture needs to be clearly defined by the leader of the agency through mission and vision statements. This culture also must reflect what is expected by the community the agency serves. Once the culture is clearly defined by the leader, it will give recruiters insight on the type of people they should seek out as candidates.

An agency's brand describes what it is like to work for the agency (Orrick, 2018). An agency's brand can be either positive or negative. Branding can help increase the level of retention for the agency because the brand will recruit potential officers who will be a better fit for the agency (Orrick, 2018). Typically, there are multiple agencies in a geographical area attempting to attract the same applicants due to staff shortages. If an agency has a better brand compared to the other agencies in the same area, it increases the chance that the agency will attract the recruit.

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By focusing on clearly defining culture and branding before beginning the recruiting process, an agency will successfully recruit top quality candidates and will have a better chance to retain them (Orrick, 2018).

Once the culture and branding has been defined, there needs to be a strategy to attract the quality applicants that the agency wants and believes it can retain. While many agencies have a recruiter or recruiting department to focus on this issue, a multi-pronged approach should be used to attract these candidates. Three areas to focus on for recruiting are an employee referral system, the internet and youth or apprentice programs.

The type of recruiting that is the most effective and has the highest probability of retention is an employee referral system (Orrick, 2018). This is when existing employees in an agency use word of mouth to recruit people to become part of their agency. While many agencies have a recruiter position, this system does not require one. Officers inside an agency can be motivated to recruit new officers for reasons such as recruitment bonuses or a decreased workload due to an agency being fully staffed. Since officers will typically look for candidates with similar traits to themselves, having a well-established culture with high retention rates should lead to the same type of candidates being recruited. This style of recruiting should only be used if an agency has a good culture and is not looking for a culture change.

The second most effective way to recruit is through use of the internet (Orrick, 2018). This includes the department's web page and social media. Departments must use caution when displaying images or using videos that do not match the agency's culture. For example, many agencies have specialized teams with minimal spots that can take years for a new recruit to join. If these teams are used heavily on the social media pages to attract a new recruit, these recruits could be disappointed and leave an agency once they realize the time that is required to join

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these teams. The overuse of these specialized teams in this form of media can portray an inconsistent message that does not match the agency's culture. If an agency has a community-oriented culture, the heavy use of a SWAT team for recruitment may not attract a recruit that will socialize with the culture of the agency. One of the goals of the socialization process, commitment, will create a newly hired officer that will want to remain and work hard for the agency (Prince, 1988). It is important that the managers of this media stay true to portraying an accurate reflection of an agency's culture or brand.

Youth or apprentice programs are a third way to recruit new officers. A study found that 50% of new recruits knew they wanted to be a police officer by the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Orrick, 2018). This means attracting younger people to your agency, even before they may be eligible to work as a police officer, can lead to hiring success at a later time. School resource officers are an easy way to make a connection with youth. Other programs such as an Explorer Program can be a successful way to teach the culture and brand of an agency to the youth of the community in which an agency serves. By starting this at a young age, it can lead to these potential recruits adopting the values of the agency. These programs are also a great time to determine if a person does not fit the culture of an agency before they are potentially hired.

Once a candidate has applied for a job, the selection process begins. First, a candidate must meet the minimum requirements set forth by an agency or the state where they will work. Minimum requirement tests can be anything from physical abilities test, skills exams, and background investigations. Since finding a person that fits the culture of the agency is one of the keys to retention, conducting a behavior based interview should be the next step. Behavior based interviews are one of the best ways to determine if a candidate identifies with the culture and values of an agency and is based on how a candidate responded to prior incidents (Orrick, 2018).

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During this interview, questions should be based around the culture and values. For example, if service is a value that is important to an agency, a candidate can be asked “What activities have you previously participated in which you served the community? What have you learned while participating in these activities?” By basing interview questions around the culture of the agency, it should be possible to find a candidate who is the right fit.

### **911 and Retention**

While there is no national repository measuring turnover within 911 centers, the percentage is typically between 17-29%. These numbers put PSTs in the top 10% of high turnover professions (Fraizer, 2022). The time it takes to fully train a telecommunicator working in a center that dispatches police, fire, and EMS ranges from six months to one year in length, on average. The investment in time, money, and effort by an agency is significant and it behooves us as a profession to hire the right people and invest in retaining them within our agency. The career path of a 911 telecommunicator is not widely known throughout the country, and some new employees do not realize the responsibilities of the job, and either turn down a job offer after their interview or quit once they have exposure to the realities of the job. To combat this, some 911 centers have created a four-week course to introduce people to the profession, which has reduced training costs by hiring people who have a better idea of the job they are preparing to do.

There have been significant changes to the job since the first 911 call in 1968, and certainly in the last 20 years with the advancement of technology. PSTs often run more than ten (10) different software applications to perform their minimum functions. Computer aided dispatch systems, NCIC, multiple GIS mapping applications, telephone systems, radio systems, body worn camera software, security cameras, and standard office software are a few of those

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applications. Next Generation 911 updates are also changes that our PSTs need to be proficient in, including telematics notifications and the potential for live video feed coming into their center in the near future. However, even with all these sophistications in technology that they are responsible for, PSTs are still classified in the “Office and Administrative Support” job class. Reclassification efforts continue with the intent to move PSTs into the “Protective Service Occupation” job class within the Standard Occupational Classification System which would help to provide them with enhanced benefits for retirement. In the U.S. House of Representatives, bill H.R.6319 - 911 Saves Act of 2023, has been introduced which would reclassify PSTs to the protective services occupation. This would better align them with the work they perform and is anticipated to have a significant impact on retention.

Locally, changes in training opportunities and development of employees are ways to impact retention in 911. For example, in St. Louis County, a strategic planning study was conducted recently and one of the findings in the staffing survey is that most staff want to be part of something greater within the organization in addition to their everyday responsibilities, but many staff have not been. Staff are included in the citizen’s academy and have a night devoted to 911 for our PSTs to share about and give a tour of our center to the citizens. Staff have also been included in job fairs and several of them have been sent to train-the-trainer courses to teach on relevant topics in 911. Another suggestion is to create a retention plan which includes recognition, growth, or advancement opportunities and to work at maintaining positive relationships with co-workers and administration (Lawrence, 2021). Adding additional job classifications for the opportunity to promote is also another strategy used to increase retention and will give the opportunity for more promotional opportunities throughout a career increasing motivation. Participation in the areas suggested as well as promoting our profession would



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increase employee buy-in to our profession as well as improve employee satisfaction which can positively impact employee retention.

### **Wellness Programs**

Proactive officer wellness programs inside an agency are crucial for recruiting and retaining law enforcement professionals. Without quality candidates coming to the agency for employment the agency will not have future leaders for succession planning. Once the agency is obtaining quality candidates through the proactive wellness programs the agency needs to continue the wellness programs for officer retention. If an agency can effectively put in place officer wellness programs it will greatly improve the quality of candidates and the retention of quality law enforcement professionals. This will assist the agency in creating a strong foundation for years to come. Erickson (2023) stated the law enforcement profession is enduring a generational crisis in recruiting and retention. Many large, urban areas throughout the nation are facing critical shortages of police officers, exacerbating rising crime rates and social dysfunction within these communities.

Officer wellness programs directly affect the recruitment efforts of an agency. Recruits are more likely to be attracted to law enforcement agencies that prioritize officer wellness. A positive work environment that promotes physical and mental well-being can make a career in law enforcement more appealing. According to Rhodes (2024) wellness programs impact the individual officer through good physical and mental health, positive relationships, positive mindset, and loyalty to the agency. The agency adds self-worth to the officers through the wellness programs and helps guide them in a positive manner to succeed within the agency. This alone builds trust between the administration and the officers that serve them.

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Officer wellness in public safety is crucial to retaining veteran employees but is often an aspect that is overlooked. By creating a proactive approach to officer wellness in public safety it improves job satisfaction, a supportive culture, reduced burnout, and increased productivity. Once this is accomplished the overall organization is set up to address the needs of the officer's wellness. When officers feel supported and valued, they are more likely to stay in their positions long term. Officer wellness programs are great for retaining veteran employees, but it also builds the agencies recruitment pool by current officers being happy with the culture of the agency and promoting it to others.

There are two approaches to officer wellness which are the mental and physical approaches. Both approaches to officer wellness need to be utilized for the agency to gain the full benefits of the wellness approach. Some examples of the physical approach to wellness are fitness classes, gym membership, wellness challenges, health screenings, nutritional programs, physical assessments, and flexible work hours to implement fitness on duty. Some examples of mental wellness approach are mental health education, employee assistance program, work life balance initiatives, mental health days, peer support groups, and access to mental health professional services.

Officer wellness programs also have a direct impact on community relationships. The wellness programs help law enforcement to look outside of an arrest for a final solution and look at the underlining issue that caused the problem. This is beginning to bring law enforcement and the community together to fight for the same cause. The trend is catching on with law enforcement and turning into specialized units like the Critical Incident Team. This team is lowering use of force incidents due to the law enforcement officers on these teams receiving specialized training in de-escalation. These ideas in return are making the officers more satisfied

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with their job and therefore staying in their current positions within their agencies. The de-escalation tactics are also bringing the agencies closer together with the communities that they serve by showing empathy to the community.

### **Financial planning**

When an agency hires a new employee to join their team there is an expectation that certain tools will be provided so that employee is able to be successful at their job function, and to keep them safe as well. In the world of law enforcement those tools can be costly and be geared towards that individual person, and may not fit or work for another. Firearms, belts, uniforms, and vests to name a few are some of the more expensive items that have to be purchased than provided to that officer, costing thousands of dollars. Prior to all those purchases, some agencies must send an applicant to the police academy, and depending on that state's requirement, that could be up to six months. That is six months of salaries that an agency has to pay an employee before they even are able to be a law enforcement officer. Once they complete that academy, prior to being deployed on the road on their own, they are required to go through further training at their department. Depending on that time frame that could last up to another six months. With all that time invested in an individual, upwards to 12 months, could equal to one years' worth of salary and benefits. According to DePietro (2020) the national average salary of a police officer in 2020 was \$67,500.00. This cost does not include the departments' contributions to pension systems, fringe benefits that could include uniform allowances, firearms qualification bonuses, longevity payments, specialty pay or other incentives. It is not uncommon for Law enforcement officers to make six figure salaries at the completion of all the potential incentives, bonuses and overtime that is available by the end of the year.

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The amount of time and money that is invested into a new employee to transition them into the law enforcement world also has to include all the time other law enforcement officers have to invest to properly train and certify the new employee. These instructors and/or Field Training Officers, are other salaried positions within the agency, their sole job is to make sure employees are kept up to date on training and technology. These positions, more specifically the Field Training Officer, are another officer that is provided a higher hourly amount while they are training a new officer. This pay raise differentiates between agencies, and adds to the financial planning agencies must take as a total package when it comes to budgetary planning of new hiring (Meade, 2016).

The costs associated with a newly hired officer, can reach into the budget fairly fast, if proper planning is not taken into consideration by budgeting administration. The total financial package is more than just a salary; it also includes a compellation of everyone involved along with their time, effort, and those salaries have to be taken into consideration. Even though these positions are a need to the community, this is everything that we need to make sure they are prepared to work alone. When an agency invests this much time and money into making them a successful law enforcement officer, it is important that we are able to get a return on the community's investment and are able to retain that officer for a long career (Meade, 2016).

### **Community Trust**

When an officer has a long career at their respective agency, the return on that investment in the officer comes around tenfold. All the training and education that the department has invested in that officer is utilized to help the department and serve that community. When you have a veteran officer they are known throughout their community, when there has to be an enforcement interaction, that face that is known throughout that community as a positive police

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officer should be able to make that interaction an easier and safer one. “Building trust by having positive interactions with the community should be a priority within all law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement officers should treat every member of the community with respect and treat non-enforcement engagements as an opportunity to build trust, trust is earned through sincere interest, collaboration, and commitment to justice, in addition to modeling professional behaviors to the community, officers must be role models for other officers” (IACP, 2020)

Trust from the community also comes with doing the right thing, keeping the public informed of what is going on in the community and allowing them to be engaged with department sponsored events. When officers are met with a difficult decision to make, taking time to explain to the community member why that decision was made could go a long way with maintaining that relationship. If we take the time to explain and be transparent during all our interactions with the public, when a controversial issue happens, there is a better chance that since the department has been transparent throughout all interactions; they know that the department will be open and transparent about a controversial topic. According to IACP (2020) if we communicate promptly and frequently during critical incidents, it could help with interactions during an emotionally charged situation.

When it comes to recruiting and retaining officers, with the long term goal of having them stay with their department for their entire career it is important to identify officers that have good interpersonal skills. These skills allow good communicative abilities to those that we have to interact with; being able to interact with them fosters a positive relationship with the community. This expectation, to interact within your community in more ways than enforcement actions, should be expressed from the top down. Department should include communication skills training within their annual in-service training, the ability to walk up to someone that you

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do not know and spark a conversation can sometimes be a tough task to do. But if we better prepare our new and current employees and makes sure that they know they are valued, and promote a healthy and safe workforce, the retention of officers should expand which in turn will keep that community informed with the same familiar faces with the goal of gaining that community trust due to not having a different officer at your door every time you need our help (Bureau of Justice, 2023).

Recruiting and retaining the correct employees is very important to departments in more than just solving a staffing issue. If we recruit and retain our officers, it will cut down on costs, it will keep the community involved with the same officers for a long time and will grow trust that when help is needed an officer known to the community is going to show up to help. If a member of the community knows the officer personally the officer will most likely go above and beyond rather than an officer that is just looking to fill some time before they leave for another agency.

### **Succession Planning**

Bratton (2008) states “succession planning is the process of reviewing the agency for leadership talent, identifying possible successors, and then providing those individuals with the training, mentoring, and support they need to prepare themselves for critical roles within the organization when vacancies occur” (p. 1). Succession planning is imperative in both law enforcement and 911 professions. It is our responsibility to provide employees with training opportunities for leadership, as leadership principles and concepts are not often something naturally possessed. Opportunities to learn these concepts and mindsets will increase the confidence of those preparing to move into those leadership roles which should in turn increase the effectiveness of the organization. We need frequent and honest conversations with those who have moved into leadership roles on areas they feel a need for further development in, and to

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have those honest conversations, there needs to be a trusted relationship to get that honest feedback.

Having a training curriculum developed for advancement opportunities will help to show our employees that we are invested in their future with the organization and are committed to creating future leaders to continue progress as established leaders retire or move on to other roles. Development training for staff helps to raise the level of expertise and confidence we have in ourselves, and it also helps to raise the expectations that we have of those in leadership roles and better prepares them for future roles. This helps us to promote confidence and build on our succession planning, as part of leading by example is how you set up your people to succeed (Abrashoff, 2008).

In the module on succession planning in our course work, one of the lessons talked about creating the environment for it, as to say, creating the thirst for advancement (Scott, 2017). As far as 911, St. Louis County did not do this well for most of my career. Opportunities for advancement, which include becoming a Certified Training Officer (CTO) or a Lead Emergency Communications Specialist, which is a floor supervisor, exist, but those promotions were not sought after. Five years ago, there were four CTOs to train new employees, which limited the number of employees able to be hired to fill vacancies and created burnout among CTOs. A significant mindset shift has occurred, in part due to having conversations with staff about never getting out of the position of being short-staffed with such a small number of CTOs, as well as the previous leadership above me sharing their vision. There currently are 19 CTOs within the division and staff have stepped up to help solve the problem of being short-staffed. There has also been an increase in more qualified applicants for Lead ECS positions, as well as peer support team and tactical dispatchers. There are employees who have relocated to the area, citing

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the potential for advancement as one of their reasons and they have told us how they heard about the reputation of our center prior to applying.

Being mindful of succession planning ensures the right people are in the right place and helps us to build future leaders. Those employees who embody servant leadership, are optimistic, display humility, and operate with integrity and are trusted are the type of employees who can help in effective succession planning. Recruiting and hiring the right people from the beginning and investing resources into developing them requires intentionality and can pay dividends in our retention efforts.

Whether the leader's focus is to retain a sworn officer or a PST, creating a highly functioning agency with an established culture is the first step that should be taken. After focusing on bringing in new members that fit the mold of the agency, having a quality wellness program and a focus on succession planning will create an environment where members want to stay and grow with the agency. Succession planning allows for the established culture to continue even when leadership changes. Due to the upfront costs to outfit and train a new member, retaining new members will help leaders balance their budgets to allocate funds to other projects. Familiarity with members of an agency leads to community trust. When you combine the growth of community trust, increased funding for additional programs and a quality brand through a focus on retention, the difficulty of finding quality recruits will decrease.

### **Conclusion**

Whether the leader's focus is to retain a sworn officer or 911 operator, creating a highly functioning agency with an established culture is the first step that should be taken. After focusing on bringing in new members that fit the mold of the agency, having a quality wellness program and a focus on succession planning will create an environment where members want to



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