

**Retention and Recruitment in Law Enforcement**

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## **Abstract**

Law enforcement is a service. The quality of service is directly linked to the quality of personnel recruited, hired, and retained. Failing to recruit and retain personnel that holds the same vision and values as the agency could have a direct impact on the agency's ability to serve the community. Recruiting sufficient qualified applicants to meet the needs of the agency is an important human resource process in an agency. The success of the recruitment process affects and impacts every other function in the agency. Law enforcement also battles retention issues. There is no simple solution to this complex problem. Agencies must first research why personnel are leaving in order to address how to combat the issue. Retention strategies need to be put in place after data has been collected to assist in retaining personnel. In this capstone presentation, we will address some issues with recruitment and offer some solutions on how to adjust recruitment practices. We will look at reasons personnel are leaving the law enforcement profession and ways to help retain personnel within law enforcement.

## **Introduction**

Recruitment and retention should be of the highest priority of each law enforcement agency to ensure that the agency continues to evolve and develop to better serve the community. Each agency should strive to recruit individuals that share similar values, purpose, and goals as the agency. These goals and values should be reviewed periodically with existing members of the agency so that leaders do not find themselves in a reactive mode but a proactive mode of leadership. Placing key leaders in recruitment is important to the agency to help find and hire individuals that will help the agency accomplish set goals. Also, having key leaders throughout the agency can help assist with retaining employees by enhancing motivation during their careers, increasing communication between leaders and subordinates, and maintaining a positive culture within the agency.

## **Generations**

According to Zippia.com, there are currently over 300,000 employed members of law enforcement in the United States, which is a shrinking number (Police Demographics and Statistics in US, 2019). The average age of a law enforcement officer is 40 years old, but recruitment should target a much younger age group encompassing the Millennials and Gen Z. The current ages of Gen Z and Millennials range from high school to their late 30s. It is reported that 78% of agencies have reported difficulty in recruiting (Hyland, S. 2018). This may be due to agencies focusing on the wrong generations.

These newer generations desire items and policies that differ from the older generations. The younger generations, Millennials and Generation Z, are more comfortable with switching agencies, as this is how they move up the ladders in their careers (The State of Recruitment: A

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Crisis for Law Enforcement, n.d.). These two generations value a work-life balance, more flexible work hours, and guaranteed time off (The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement, n.d.). These generations don't like mandated overtime and missing holidays with family, which is sometimes unavoidable in law enforcement (The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement, n.d.).

The newer generations like the use of social media. Agencies could focus attention on these areas to draw younger members interested in seeking a career in law enforcement. Today millennial officers want to have the freedom to express themselves on social media and be allowed to have visible tattoos (P.K., 2019). In the article "An Open Letter from a Millennial Officer," the writer states, "Get with the 'New Generation program and utilize social media outreach" (P.K., 2019). For the millennial, social media is important for recruitment by agencies. Millennials believe that when departments use social media to depict the job as fun, it is more appealing (P.K., 2019).

### **Benefits of Social Media**

There are many benefits to social media. Law enforcement agencies have the ability to reach members of society without having to pay for airtime. Agencies can put together recruitment videos and fliers that are geared toward certain generations to make the job more appealing.

The Millennial Officer also wants to change the culture. According to P.K. (2019) "Command staff and older generation Officers, please don't perpetuate the toxic culture in this job. That same unending toxicity continues on when it is taught to younger Officers who are learning so much from you" (para. #2). The Millennial generation understands the difficulty of

change but understands how important it is to change the culture to reflect more positivity to make the career path survive these daunting times.

### **The Millennial Officer**

Another important item for a Millennial Officer is tattoos. There are some agencies that do not allow visible tattoos. There is a large number of millennials who have visible tattoos. The Millennial officer feels that visible (appropriate) tattoos should be allowed and would help recruit more officers (P.K., 2019). They also identified the fact that many millennial officers are in the military. These military veterans often have tattoos and the agencies that do not allow visible tattoos limit their applicants' candidates (P.K., 2019).

In 2021, Gen Z only made up 11.6% of the workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Because of this, there is very little information regarding Gen Z in law enforcement. Recruitment for Gen Z should start within middle and high schools. We do know that there are ways that we can help manage Gen Z. This includes accommodating employee differences by learning about their needs, allowing the workplace to shape itself, and learning about the concerns of the staff.

### **The Gen Z Officer**

In regards to the recruitment of Gen Z, agencies should focus on a flexible work schedule, quality of life, and styles of training, and they must feel valued and respected (Snyder, 2017). This training style is essential for Gen Z, as they learn differently from prior generations. Gen Z likes to take recordings instead of notes and does not like lectures. They need instant information through interactive forms of learning and will also use social media to gain more knowledge (Scroble, 2019).

These newer generations have a different perspective regarding work ethic. They will use sick and vacation time as they feel necessary, want the latest and best items for work, and will not hesitate to leave their place of employment to seek opportunities that cater to their wants (Scroble, 2019).

### **Recruitment in Law Enforcement**

Through personal experience, it is noted that many agencies have had a number of law enforcement officers retire and resign from public safety. Obstacles and hurdles, such as salary, public perception, and mandatory training, have caused law enforcement agencies to fail at replenishing the workforce.

### **Law Enforcement Salary**

Recruiting law enforcement officers is a problem that needs to be addressed. The first thing to be evaluated is salary. Law Enforcement salaries have varied over time. The unique nature of law enforcement funding makes identifying a standard salary difficult. In the past, it was said, "When you become a police officer, you did not do it for the money but for the respect". The goal of law enforcement officers was not wealth, but to serve the community and make enough money to support themselves. Unfortunately, as the cost of living increases, law enforcement salaries have not. According to Police 1 article, "The average starting salary for a college graduate from the class of 2020 was \$56,484 and expected to make over \$85,000" (Mellen, 2021, par 28). Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office was one of the lowest paid in the area until recently. The department proposed a millage increase to provide for law enforcement salary increase. The community supported the department by voting with over 70 percent for the millage tax increase and subsequent pay increase for officers. Another obstacle that law

enforcement has with recruitment pertains to the way the law enforcement profession is perceived. "Only 51 percent of adults placed 'a great deal' of confidence in the police" (Mellen, 2021, par 32).

### **Community Perception**

Historically, law enforcement was observed as an honorable profession. With the changes in American perception of law enforcement, recruitment has dropped. Prospective recruits fear the response of the community and the negative stigma associated with being a member of law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies are judged by the media and communities based on limited information. Law enforcement agencies must work to change the mindset of the community toward law enforcement so that the recruitment process will be more desirable. The agency must conduct proactive communication within the agency and the community. The agency should promote cop talks, and social events, and promote positive law enforcement encounters. Sheriff Nash stated, "There are three elements of communication: content, which carries seven to ten percent of meaning, voice, which carries thirty to forty percent the meaning, and non-verbal (gestures), which carries fifty to sixty percent of meaning" (Nash, 2017). Law enforcement officers are judged on and off duty. Citizens base their view of law enforcement on each personal encounter. When citizens have a bad interaction with law enforcement officers, a process to repair the relationship must occur. Law enforcement agencies need to move away from relying on the reputation of the profession to build a recruitment base and build a personal relationship with the local community. Law enforcement agencies need to reevaluate their reputations and make improvements to recruit individuals that best fit the agency's values, purpose, and goals.

### **Mandatory Training**

Finally, law enforcement requires additional mandatory training. Law enforcement officers are required to do approximately 600 hours of training upon entry into the agency. Most new recruits incorrectly assume that they will quickly be put into a patrol car and given a firearm after signing up. The new recruits are mandated to complete an academy that is equal to the academic level of a college degree plus extreme physical tests and challenges. The academy leadership must quickly identify recruits who may not have the mental and/or physical requirements needed for the profession. This effective leader must work with these recruits and assist them with improvement in their skills. Academy leadership is vital to set up new recruits for success.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Every agency should develop a plan for recruitment. Dr. Anderson stated. "There are 5 stages of development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and celebrating" (Anderson, 2017). Most agencies utilize inspirational advertisements which demonstrate the values and culture of the agency. Agencies work to identify obstacles in recruiting qualified individuals and make corrections and improvements to the hiring process. Agencies prioritize positive public relationships to promote the changes in the culture of the department through training and developing new recruits, via the police academy. New recruits are graduates possessing the skills, training, and knowledge needed to best serve their communities.

The profession of law enforcement is not for everyone. The law enforcement profession is a lifestyle and a commitment to serve others. If law enforcement agencies want to recruit the best people for the job, law enforcement agencies need to identify the problems in their



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organizations. Recruitment is a national problem for law enforcement, but each agency has different needs and cultures. Agency recruitment needs to shift and promote the many different jobs within the organization and highlight the progression and additional training for them.

The agencies need to have a positive relationship with the communities and have it displayed on social media platforms to reach all generations. The agencies have to build relationships with the younger generations of the community and aggressively address any problems. Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office has shown how to reach and build relationships with the younger generation with the program "Barren's bears". The life-sized bear is the mascot of the agency and provides teddy bears to children in crisis. This is an excellent way for the agency to identify and interact with the younger generations. This also allows the community to observe the law enforcement culture from a different view. This allows a positive perception of law enforcement and builds relationships to gain new recruits for the agency.

### **Retention in Law Enforcement**

Recruiting the best individuals for the job is a task, but once they are recruited it is up to the agency and the leaders to retain those employees. Retention is defined as the continued possession, use, or control of something (google.com, n.d.). Retention in the workplace is how long an employee stays at the same business or agency. According to research done by Police Executive Research Forum resignations increased by 18% and retirements increased by 45% in participating agencies. Data was collected from April 1, 2020-March 31, 2021 and compared to data collected from April 1, 2019-March 31, 2020, with 194 agencies of different sizes participating (South, n.d.).

### **Retention Strategies**

Agencies must research and find out why personnel are resigning and set strategies in place to retain them. There are several reasons why a law enforcement officer would resign before reaching retirement. A good retention program starts in the field training program and continues throughout the officer's career with professional development courses, mentorship, a reward system, and opportunity within the agency (no author, 2021). When an officer is recruited and hired a career path should be discussed and set up with the new officer. With this, a mentor program should be put in place to assist each officer with this career path and with help along their journey within the agency.

### **Law Enforcement Benefits**

Most agencies or supervisors have little or no control over pay increases or benefit enhancements; therefore, it is even more important that employees enjoy their agency and feel as if they are part of something bigger. It is common for younger employees to leave an agency if they do not feel valued. It is estimated that 24% of officers who leave one agency go to work for another law enforcement agency. Approximately 78% of employees stay with their employer because of benefit programs that include retention programs (no author, 2021). To feel part of a team employees need to be able to give feedback with no retribution. Leaders should welcome feedback and participation in decision-making. Employees should be able to speak freely about how to improve the agency and how to improve each other. Being a legacy leader will help retain employees and will help bring up new leaders that strive to be great leaders.

### **Employee Wellbeing**

To retain employees a successful leader should put programs in place for the well-being of each employee. Rosalyn Harrington stated, “The human factor is the single most significant piece in any outcome for law enforcement” (Harrington, 2017). We as leaders should place the well-being of our employees as a high priority. There are several programs that can be put into place for the well-being of employees and these programs should be used in the recruitment process and will assist with retention.

### **Peer Support in Law Enforcement**

Peer Support Teams are defined by Sgt. Robert Cook “as non-professional interpersonal interactions wherein a person attempts to assist another person with a stressful circumstance, and the person providing support shares common background, experience, condition, or history with the person he or she is attempting to help” (Cook, 2022). Peer support teams are a great way for employees to aid each other with stressful situations on and off duty. Peer support teams can even be extended to family members of employees if needed. This will help with the mental health of employees. Also, an Employee Assistance Program can be put in place by the agency if an employee would need professional assistance with mental health. An employee assistance program is a workplace service that helps employees, and often their families, cope with a crisis or other stress-related situations. Mental health is a serious issue and an agency should provide resources for each employee.

### **Financial Wellbeing**

A Financial Wellness Program is another way agencies can provide assistance to the well-being of employees. This type of program can be explained during recruitment and can also

be used in assisting with the retention of current employees. Several financial institutions offer programs and will partner with law enforcement to have workshops and training to work hand in hand with employees. Guidance and tools are provided to help accomplish unique financial goals. Employees will learn how to break down financial goals and gain control over their money. This will help with mental health and help reduce the stress that comes from financial burdens.

### **Organizational Change**

Considering the issue of retention in law enforcement, there are several strategies a leader can employ to motivate and strengthen the public safety official's mindset to ensure longevity. Primarily, this is an opportunity for organizational change where leadership development can be embedded within the organization's culture to bolster accountability and productivity. Leadership development within the public safety organization should be the norm rather than the exception. Development of the individual's communication, cultivation, collaboration, and community involvement skills will build a durable foundation that the agency and those who follow can benefit from in terms of legacy.

### **Succession Planning**

Legacy begins with succession planning whereby the leader can ensure organizational growth and continuity in knowledge and experience thereby leaving a legacy of excellence. In thinking of legacy, leadership must understand that junior employees are the lifeblood of the organization however, the junior employee does not typically think of themselves in that context and need to be developed as future leaders. To meet future strategic goals, the organization will need an initiative-taking approach in developing a pipeline of leaders to ensure key experience

and knowledge stays within the agency even when leaders depart or retire. Wellington states, “Retirement often happens in groups, the result is often the loss of institutional knowledge and experience which can impact an organization’s daily operations and strategic direction” (Scott, 2017). Succession planning initiatives should begin early in the developing law enforcement professional’s career where they are not only mentored internally and given opportunities to lead. The internal development opportunities provide a healthy and nurturing environment for junior personnel to make decisions and grow from while more formal external training reinforces leadership competencies. This internal development provides an excellent opportunity to identify individuals with interpersonal abilities, the right cultural fit, professionalism, and most importantly servant leadership skills. The ability to build trust through interpersonal skills goes to the core of leadership succession initiatives that have organizational retention interests in mind.

### **Mentorship**

The issue of retention should begin during the academy to introduce the recruit to the concepts of leadership. Abrashoff (2018) states, “Embed leadership development in your culture. Turning people into leaders isn’t the flavor of the week or month; it should be part of the way the organization lives day to day. Mentoring, feedback, and civic involvement must be the accepted norm, not procedures that are merely being tolerated for the short term” (p.37).

In designing a plan for the long-term goal of officer retention, the organization would assign a veteran officer with at least 15 years of experience to every recruit as a mentor on day one. This senior officer would remain the recruit’s mentor throughout their career, working on long-term or strategic goals of the junior officer until the veteran retires. This relationship is many folds and works to both their benefits. The senior member passes down knowledge,

heritage, pride, and dedication, setting the cultural example in terms of retention. The junior member passes up the younger generation's point of view that the older generation can learn from if they want to be successful in cultivating and leading future law enforcement professionals in the context of legacy.

During the mentorship, the senior member listens to and cultivates the junior member's communication and collaborative skills. This model empowers the rookie with feedback where a climate of trust can be developed while learning to be a team member. This creates a team of people to support each other in order to complete organizational goals (Scott, 2017).

Learning to collaborate is also a top priority in team building that affects the retention and longevity of the public safety official. As such, part of the senior member's development of the recruit is to identify what interests the junior member has within the arena of public safety or what excites them outside of traditional law enforcement. Once interests are identified, the mentor would then team up the recruit with one of the organizational betterment committees or with one of the community outreach programs partnered with by the public safety organization. This embedded leadership development approach into the culture of the organization promotes communication, cultivation, collaboration, and community involvement by the individual in anticipation of being assigned as a mentor which in turn can encourage retention.

As the public safety professional career progresses, it will be important for the mentor to monitor and address the predictable internal assaults that their junior officers experience on a personal and organizational level if they are to be retained. Left untreated, law enforcement professionals will become overwhelmed with cynical thoughts leading to a withdrawal of their personal and professional lives.

### **Emotional Awareness in Law Enforcement**

Building on the concept of retention, this is an opportunity for the mentor to encourage a mentality of survivorship and not one of victim-based thinking. As survivors of the law enforcement profession, our junior officers must be guided to focus on the things and events they can personally control and which ones they cannot control. In particular, law enforcement professionals need to be guided and reminded of the importance of relationships and activities outside of public safety that they can control in their personal lives. Gilmartin (2002) states, “A much more helpful approach for the officer leaving work is to have the goal of not so much turning off police work as turning on something different” (p.112). So, the goal of the mentor is to teach junior officers to maintain control of their personal lives by practicing aggressive personal time management to every extent possible in order to be a survivor and not a victim. This is a crucial time in the junior officer’s career as they become orientated to the excitement of the roller coaster ride that is the law enforcement profession. Here, the mentor explores the importance of personal proactive time management versus personal reactive time management with the junior officer as most of their professional time is spent in reactive policing or in reacting to the needs of the organization. Encouraging personal proactive time management will be key to retention for the organization over the long run but more importantly, this mindset will benefit the individual law enforcement professional. In developing a personally proactive mindset, the junior officer must be encouraged to continuously and aggressively invest time daily for family and interpersonal relationships outside of the law enforcement community. The scheduling of daily or weekly activities can empower the junior officer into being a survivor and not a victim which in turn can create positive outcomes in relation to retention.

### **Conclusion**

It is an honor to be in the law enforcement profession and have the opportunity to serve our communities in order to create a positive culture. It is up to us as leaders to change the way we recruit new employees and to focus on and encourage the next generations. Further, as effective leaders, we should motivate and empower current employees in order to retain them within our organizations. Being credible leaders we need to train, develop, mentor, and lead all employees from recruitment to retirement. When this is accomplished we will, as legacy leaders, have left our organizations better than we found them.



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