

**Leadership in Law Enforcement Recruitment**

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### Abstract

Over the past decade a reduction in the pool of applicants and heightened agency turnover has become an emerging trend throughout the nation. Law enforcement agencies can combat this trend by seeking innovative strategies for recruitment and retention. Individual agencies can develop the tactics outlined in this article to attract more of the best and brightest of the talent pool available. The future of law enforcement and the communities they served depends on recruiting quality candidates that remain in the field to become the future agency leaders in the law enforcement profession.

## **Leadership in Law Enforcement Recruitment**

Law enforcement nationwide is struggling to fill vacancies due to increased rate of turnover and lack of interest in the profession among other issues. This problem has been growing for more than a decade; our research has found articles discussing the issue which were written as far back as 2006. According to Switzer (2007), there were approximately 15,000 positions that were not filled.

Multiple articles from Law Officer, discussing the topic, suggest common causes for the hiring crisis. Some of the problems were identified as an aging law enforcement population, improvement in retirement plans, and decline in the job applicant pool. Part of this decline is due to a lack of interest in the profession itself and is partially due to under qualified candidates or candidates that do not meet standards of conduct when it comes to being able to successfully pass a background investigation. With the economy rebounding there is plenty of opportunity for people to find better paying jobs and safer positions in the private sector. The US Military is also pulling in potential law enforcement candidates to support our ongoing military efforts abroad.

On a national level, law enforcement is portrayed in a negative way by members in the media and citizens who are vocal on social media (Donovan and Klahm, 2015). Politicians are using this negativity to elevate their positions and push political agendas. This political climate hurts our recruiting efforts and is causing those already in the profession consider taking early retirements or seeking jobs in the private sector. In our experiences, we have seen our departments lose more than one officer to private sector jobs either for better pay, less stress, or for a safer work environment. Based on our involvement with the hiring processes for our agencies, we have heard from more than one candidate that they were not sure about pursuing a career in law enforcement because of the current political and societal view of the profession.

## **Literature Review**

There are countless examples of politicians putting political pressure on law enforcement to change its practices. There are also examples where politicians and community activists openly condemn the profession. One prime example discusses how Mosby as the District Attorney rushed to judgment in a use of force incident charging officers without proper evidence and against proper protocol. This rush to judgment was due to extreme political pressure by political movements and activist groups (Law Officer, 2016).

Technology has changed how the community looks at law enforcement. The media has focused on the negative incidents involving law enforcement as well as the frequency and severity of crime. Facebook, Twitter, and other web-based applications and sites allow everyday citizens the ability to share videos and comments about law enforcement interactions with little to no knowledge of law enforcement policy and procedure. This information can be shared instantaneously to a large group of the population. Communication like this shapes the attitude of citizens about crime and justice. Law enforcement agencies recruit their future employees from the same citizen group. With the negative issues arising from the increase in use of technology to share information and the current political climate, many potential applicants are reluctant to step into the field of law enforcement. They can pursue careers in other fields where they will be paid as much or more and not have this added stress.

## **Implications**

How agencies recruit and hire through this crisis will have a long-term effect on law enforcement and the community. A cohesive, profession wide effort will be required to fill vacant positions nationwide. This will require law enforcement expanding recruitment efforts,

and a culture shift from focusing solely on recruiting for a single agency to recruiting for the profession as a whole.

The future of law enforcement could be dramatically influenced by effective recruiting of quality employees. As the baby-boomer generation reaches retirement age, and personnel are needed to fill the positions vacated by retiring officers, the newly hired officers must have the leadership, skills, and abilities to fill the upper management positions vacated by the retiring managers. This problem is not unique to law enforcement as varying industries are experiencing the same phenomenon. According to DeRosa (2015), only 15 percent of American companies feel that they have the talent necessary to fill the future key leadership positions. As the profession progresses, the need for talented leadership will never change, and hiring quality people with good character and skills to lead agencies into the future is an essential first-step in this process.

The expense of recruiting and retaining quality law enforcement professionals is difficult to measure. The cost of training and developing new employees varies by agency. Annual officer salaries can range from \$40,000 to \$60,000. An officer that is hired will likely take at least six months, but can take up to one year, of training to become a contributing member of any agency. In addition, there is the expense of equipment and uniforms as well as the various benefits the officer receives. According to Joost (2018), in Waukesha County, Wisconsin the expense for a new deputy is \$52,000 and \$60,000 from the time of hire until completion of the academy and field training. With ever tightening budgets and consistently increasing demands on law enforcement across the nation, the importance of spending every dollar efficiently has never been greater. As a result, recruiting new officers that can successfully complete the

training process, and subsequently retaining those officers for the majority of their career saves the agency and the community money and resources.

When looking for possible solutions in dealing with the recruitment and retention issues that law enforcement faces, it is imperative that we find the source of this problem. Instead of looking at the proximate cause, the root cause needs to be explored. In many cases, the issue of hiring, recruitment and retention in law enforcement is done once the applicant expresses an interest in the field. This can be seen in current recruitment styles such as job and career fairs, posting on police-type websites, and in-person recruitment from technical colleges. While all these methods have the potential to bring long-term employees, it fails to recognize another pool of untapped applicants that exist – the high school student.

### **Local Recruitment Solutions**

In many high schools across the country, students may not have decided on a career choice until their junior or senior year, if at all. Incoming college students may not have any idea on the coursework they will need, or the direction they should be looking, for their professional career. Law enforcement can begin focusing on these individuals at a young age and preparing them for a potential career in police work.

This recruitment style can be applied in the Explorer, Cadet, or Aide type programs. Programs like this can be voluntary or compensated and are directly aimed at high school youth and provides them with access and exposure to the law enforcement field. Currently, agencies that have these programs often recruit through word-of-mouth. This can be expanded to include a presentation-style booth within the high school to disseminate information. Proactive follow-up with students and their parents would also be beneficial. When a student expresses an interest

at school, the recruiter needs to follow-up with the student and their parents at home. The home visit will help explain the program, expose the recruiter to the candidates' family, and begin the communication process. By travelling to the candidates' home, it may also reach a target audience that does not have the means to travel to the agencies or may not have the motivation to bring the child to the agency for basic information about the program. Once the candidate for the program is accepted, they will gain a better understanding of the interworking of the law enforcement profession. A better understanding will help dispel unrealistic ideas or expectations the candidate may have about the career.

Another important aspect of the Explorer-type program is that it will allow members of the agency to recognize individuals with high-level character traits. Conversely, it may expose character flaws early on, saving the agency time and money. Agencies may find it easier to hire applicants based on character as well as skill. Pairing this local recruitment solution with a national campaign – aimed at improving the message sent through the media – will increase the number and quality of applicants available to law enforcement agencies.

### **National Recruitment Solutions**

Addressing the negative viewpoint that the media is imposing on law enforcement, which is reducing the attractiveness of the law enforcement profession, national law enforcement organizations need to take an aggressive stance to improve the perception of the field of law enforcement for the community. Sending a proper message encourages citizens who want to serve their community to consider a career in law enforcement. Groups such as the National Sheriff's Association and the Fraternal Order of Police could assist by promoting the positive traits of the law enforcement community. Included in the national campaign should be the four corners of the moral compass - peace, service, justice, equity in a national campaign. These

organizations could assist the law enforcement profession by creating a campaign much like the United States Marines have developed over the years. Positive marketing strategies could share the campaign to encourage citizens to look into the profession of law enforcement as well as improve the perception of law enforcement for the entire nation. Leadership in these organizations can seek the younger generations within law enforcement already to help them develop a campaign that will be interesting to their generation.

### **Role of Leadership**

In addition to these solutions, the culture of law enforcement must accept the new members in positive manner. The old days of “hazing” and making sure that people “earn their time” are not conducive to creating an agency worth working for. In fact, this culture can negate all the hard work that went into the recruitment of these individuals.

As leaders within our agencies, it is imperative that we focus our efforts on deep change. Deep change is a difficult and time-consuming initiative that requires an alignment of self with values that reflect the goals and vision of the agency (Long, 2018). When members of the agency are permitted to spread pervasive and rebellious attitudes amongst impressionable new members, all efforts to assimilate our culture could be destroyed. To prevent this dynamic from reoccurring, discipline must be swift and adequate to initiate and sustain the desired culture change. All the time, resources, and hard work that are required to recruit and hire the new employee can be wasted if the work culture is toxic. Individuals must take responsibility and be accountable for their actions in order for deep change to emerge.

Identifying and developing both the formal and informal leaders within an organization, with high levels of emotional intelligence, is essential in ensuring a long-term plan for success.



These leaders become mentors for new employees. Mentors are a critical component in any organization – they help others understand the goals and vision of the agency. They can also be change agents by dispelling rumors and negative atmospheres that may result from disgruntled employees. The mentor not only develops a better understanding of their own job, but by teaching it to someone else, they become a master of their trade. The leader, formal or informal, becomes the tool for removing toxicity and contributes to the long-term retention of employees.

### **Personal Experience**

Twenty years ago in Wisconsin, it was not unusual for there to be hundreds of applicants for a single position at an agency. In recent years, this has been reduced to 10 or fewer applicants per position. This may seem adequate, but the quality of applicants has decreased. In our experience, few applicants may have the desired skills, ability, and character needed to be a quality employee.

All of us have experienced a challenging integration into the law enforcement culture. This culture may have contributed to others leaving the profession before they even completed their probationary period. For years, the fact that new recruits had to suffer through many hours of overtime and menial tasks in order to gain acceptance from the senior officers has been the norm. This is not a welcoming atmosphere and is not conducive to the retention of quality employees.

There have been successes with the Explorer Groups, exemplified by one of the authors who started out as a Cadet with the Waukesha County Sheriff's Office. He worked his way through the ranks of the Sheriff's Office from Cadet to Deputy Inspector. The experience gained in his years as a Cadet was critical to his knowledge of the operations and expectations of the

agency, greatly contributing to his overall success within the agency. By creating a program within high schools, other students could also obtain the valuable experience this author did with the cadet program and in return the agency would develop a candidate pool with numerous quality applicants.

We have been influenced by positive media campaigns similar to the one suggested. As stated earlier, the United States Marine Corps has been successful with their memorable ads that encourage citizens to be part of, “The Few, the proud, the Marines.” In the past, law enforcement agencies have recruited on an individual basis. Those involved in the law enforcement profession could collaborate to establish a media campaign that can be used by all agencies. A distinguishing ad campaign that promotes a positive perspective of the law enforcement profession may be very successful in assisting all agencies in recruiting quality candidates.

### **Conclusion**

Recruitment is not an issue only experienced by law enforcement. The effects of a lack of quality employees will be detrimental not only to the law enforcement profession but also the communities they serve. Agencies must seek innovative strategies to attract the best and brightest candidates available in their communities such as the ones proposed here. Tightened budgets and competitive private sector jobs limit the options the law enforcement community has to offer. Other nonmonetary benefits must be considered in order to attract the candidates needed to fill the law enforcement leadership positions of the future. Leaders promoting a positive inclusive environment that expects accountability, mentorship, and a sense belonging can lead to the deep change needed to advance the profession of law enforcement.

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