REGIONALIZATION OF POLICE CANINE UNITS

JOURNAL ARTICLE

DALE REISSIG
MANHATTAN BEACH POLICE DEPARTMENT

COMMAND COLLEGE/EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE CLASS XXV
PEACE OFFICER STANDARDS AND TRAINING
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

MAY 1998

25-0518

This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

© 1998 by the
California Commission on Peace Officer
Standards and Training

As we approach the 21st Century, law enforcement officials must evaluate the methods used to deliver the best possible police services to the community while examining innovative approaches to suppress and prevent crime. Hand in hand with this task, leaders of police organizations are continually faced with funding issues.

One solution to reduced funding facing law enforcement agencies is regionalization. In areas where agencies already have established relationships and work closely on a daily basis, the concept of regionalization has already occurred. It makes sense to combine resources to attack common problems. Under existing law, California cities have enormous freedom to cooperate with each other to advance their purposes and exercise their common powers.[1]

Regionalization is not a new concept. Based on the experiences of many law enforcement agencies, it has become a viable law enforcement solution tailored for the future. Additionally, regionalization may create better trained personnel and reflect increased efficiency. This article will look at the impact of regionalizing police canine units.

From a historical perspective, canines have been used in law enforcement since the development of the first canine teams in the early 1900's.[2] In 1958, the first police service dog program was introduced to the United States in Baltimore, Maryland through the efforts of Patrick Cahil, a retired London canine instructor.[3] Through the early 1960's,

police canine units started appearing on the west coast. Their image and impact on street crime was the catalyst for other departments to start their own canine units.

During the 1980's, most canines were utilized primarily for handler protection and deployed to search for and find criminals who fled from police. In this arena, the canines excelled. However, the reality of canine liability was starting to emerge. Up to this time, most police agencies followed what was referred to as a find and hold policy. Dogs were trained to bite the suspect and hold firm with their teeth. Lawsuits and other bad publicity prompted a shift to find and bark policies, whereby canines were trained to find the suspect and bark at the location.[4]

By the 1990's, departments were closely examining canine units. Some departments found it too expensive to purchase new canines, specially outfit a vehicle and provide the necessary levels of training to keep their department out of court. Other departments experienced significant judgments over canine deployments stemming from injuries to suspects. Sometimes, there were lawsuits even when the apprehensions were good.[5] While some departments let their canine programs close down or decided against filling vacant positions, others examined cross training canines for multiple tasks, the most common of which was narcotics detection. Narcotic cross training became popular among departments that had existing narcotics units or participated in regional

task forces. The ability of canines to detect narcotics greatly aided investigators during a search. Sending canines on search warrants to sniff out drugs also became very profitable for some agencies during a time when asset forfeitures were viewed as a potential source of revenue for active departments.

What began as a trend to increase officer safety, reduce crime and catch criminals turned into a tool that has some administrators examining the worth of canine units. As the 1990's close, many departments are re-evaluating their canine units. Some have been eliminated due to budget reductions and others have been reduced in size.

Regionalization of police canine units is a possible solution to these problems. Rather than having each department fund and staff a canine unit with one or more teams to patrol their individual city on a limited basis, departments would contribute staff and/or funding to operate a regional unit that could provide a greater spectrum of coverage and services to each community.

Regionalization of any law enforcement effort is a large task. Not only is each agency equally involved, but each city government and their represented community are affected. In order to orchestrate a project of this nature, a core planning group with representatives from each agency, should be selected to develop the priorities and objectives of the program.

Once this task is completed, the program priorities and objectives must be discussed and agreed to by the immediate stakeholders. This process will be critical to the success of a regionalized canine program. Hidden agendas and unclear concepts must be unearthed, addressed and resolved before the plan can move forward. Cooperation and overwhelming support are key ingredients to ensure success and forward progress.

Once the project is underway, the planning group would develop a comprehensive proposal of tasks and assignments. This could be broken into components that identify current capabilities as well as proposed training objectives tied to expanded future tasks and program responsibilities.

The planning group would be responsible for evaluating available resources and make recommendations concerning potential and/or projected future resources. This would include personnel and financial commitments from each agency.

Upon completion of these tasks, the planning group would finalize performance measures for the unit and ensure that the needs of the customers and accomplishment of the mission needs are identified and adopted.

Each agency will also have internal issues to contend with. Some will be shared with other agencies and some will be unique to one or two. Because this unit would be newly created, management of the unit and

the methodology employed for the personnel selection process will be given a great amount of scrutiny. Fairness and strict adherence to an established selection criteria will ease tensions and concerns within each agency.

Economic concerns also need to be addressed. Each agency faces the escalating costs of maintaining a canine unit. Regionalization of police canines may reduce the overall number of canines currently working in the region. However, a regionalized police canine unit can provide greater levels of coverage to each city and potentially reduce costs at the same time.

Any assessment of police canine units would be incomplete without a discussion on liability. Civil suits against law enforcement resulting from canine bites are not uncommon.[6] Proper organization and management of the unit is the key to reducing the risk of being sued. Proper selection, strict training guidelines and supervision should contribute toward the accomplishment of this goal. Shared responsibility in the event of a suit is a possibility with a regionalized unit. Utilizing existing guidelines for similar regional specialty units should address this concern. Additionally, control and governance issues will need to be addressed as they present themselves.

Each city involved and their elected officials will be examining the impact of a regionalized canine program on their community. A

paramount concern would be the level of service to their respective communities, costs and liability. Each police chief will look at the proposed unit to determine effectiveness, efficiency and ability to deliver enhanced levels of service to the community. Police chiefs will also examine the impact on existing personnel within their agency. Each community and its residents will expect an increased perception of safety, reduced levels of crime and will share some concerns about cost. Undoubtedly, each police association that represents current and aspiring canine handlers will seek to participate in the process of forming a regionalized unit. Police officer associations may also manifest themselves as an opponent during the process. Early involvement and participation by these groups may eliminate issues and concerns as the process evolves.

Regionalization brings about change. In any change process there is always a future state - a place or condition one wishes to achieve; a present state - the current condition in relation to the desired state; and a transition state - the getting from the present state to the desired state: the period during which the actual change takes place.[7] Once the decision to implement a particular strategy is made, a sound transition plan must be developed. The most desirable scenario is one that creates the least amount of stress, remains consistent throughout the process and resolves conflict.

There are many advantages of a regional canine unit. The opportunity to provide canine coverage twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, is very appealing and should serve as a strong motivator throughout the life of the project. The challenge for the transition management team will be to demonstrate how this strategy will benefit the operations of each of the involved agencies.

Once the regional canine unit is operational, the development of performance indicators will be beneficial to conduct an analysis of the program. Search and find data, arrest statistics and response times to calls for service are but a few of the tools that would be available to consistently monitor and evaluate a regional canine program. Survey tools designed to solicit citizen reactions and comments would provide an opportunity to measure any changes in the public's perception of safety. All of this information will provide the basis for a clear before and after view of the program.

Innovative law enforcement leaders constantly search for solutions and concepts that will improve on their methods of delivering services to their respective community. Regionalization of police canine units is one solution that can maximize resources and provide enhanced levels of service to the community.

[1] Furth, Wayne S., Melching, Jeffrey T. "Existing Legal Framework for Intergovernmental Cooperation" Western City, June 1996

[2] Resch, Randall C. "K-9s in Law Enforcement: They're Worth the Effort." Police, February 1997

[3] Zwickey, Jared. Is there a Future for the Police Canine. California Commission on POST, Project 3-0049, 1987

[4] Savage, David. "Necessary Weapon, or Excessive Force?" Los Angeles Times, February 29, 1996

[5] Strandberg, Keith W. "Canine Units." Law Enforcement Technology, September 1997

[6] Hawley, Donna L. "K-9 Bite Liability is a Growing Concern." Police, February 1997

[7] Beckhard, Richard, Harris, Reuben T. Organizational Transitions. Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1987