

The Public Safety Concept – An Alternative Approach to Protecting Your Community

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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).

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It is a fairly quiet Friday night in the city of Rohnert Park. Public Safety Officer (PSO) John Dixon patrols his beat, thinking about the upcoming cruise he is going to take with his family the next day, when his radio crackles. His thoughts are interrupted by the unit's radio. "Four Lincoln Forty with Four Lincoln Fifty, respond to a vehicle into a house at 440 Maple Lane" it crackles. PSO Dixon acknowledges the call; upon arriving, he sees a blue pick-up truck with front end damage back out of the driveway and flee quickly southbound on Maple. Dixon notices the gas meter on the side of the house has been sheared off, igniting a fire ball rising to the eaves of the house and into the attic. He calls in the situation and asks for a fire response, giving the dispatcher a brief description of the blaze and possible suspect vehicle.

Instead of chasing after the blue pick up, Dixon runs to the front door and knocks loudly to get the resident's attention. After getting the family and pets out of the house, he goes to the trunk of his patrol car, pulls out his fire turnouts and puts them on as the first-in engine arrives. Dixon puts on a breathing apparatus and joins the engine crews as they start fire suppression activities. He's soon joined by other PSO's performing traffic control. Others apprehend the driver of the vehicle, who ultimately is arrested for driving under the influence. The on-duty Sergeant assumes Incident Command managing both suppression activities and efforts to apprehend the hit and run driver.

All of the safety personnel on scene of the fire and involved in the arrest of the driver of the pick up are Public Safety Officers, cross-trained as police officers and firefighters. If you are a police or fire purist at heart, you might be asking yourself, how does this system work? What are the operational pros and cons? Is there an efficiency and cost savings for taxpayers? Can a Public Safety Officer be competent in both disciplines given the increasing amount of mandated training? What are some of the issues surrounding the model that are prohibitive to implementation in other agencies? In an era of declining resources, a public safety model may be a viable option for newer communities.

Introduction

The author used his 20 years of experience with the Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety to provide a perspective of the dual-role model and discuss some of the on-going challenges that face department staff as the city and agency grows. The article will briefly explore some of the issues surrounding police and fire culture, public perception, and recruiting and hiring. The intent of the article is give the reader a chance to see what it might look and feel like to manage this very viable option for law enforcement in the next decade.

A Clash of Cultures

The role of a Public Safety Officer can be quite different from that of a traditional police officer or firefighter. There is often a distinct public perception between police officers being the “enforcers” and firefighters being the “heroes”. This dichotomy is very evident

when one has acted in the dual role of the Public Safety Officer. One day you can be riding on a fire engine and everyone waves at you and smiles. The next day you are patrolling in a squad car; no one looks at you or smiles. There are also the perceptions of the respective public safety professions.

Both professions demand initial extensive training in an academy and successful completion of an in-house training program and probation period. Each profession is difficult, at best, to master due to the on-going training requirements and case law issues in which both must remain proficient. Public Safety Officers face this stark reality when dealing with the identity of the cross-trained role.

Typically, police officers work alone for short periods of time throughout the workday, coming together when the nature of the call dictates more resources are needed for control, safety, or geographical limitations. They may have to patrol large areas in remote places by themselves, with back up coming from far distances with delayed response times. They must also often be independent workers and problem solvers. Conversely, firefighters work in teams in 24 hour shifts; training, working, and living together. Firefighters respond to calls requiring a large amount of resources quickly. The demands of the job are mostly physical as opposed to that of a police officer. One might argue the laws governing our social conduct create a norm where the cop on the beat is driven more by interpretation, application and enforcement of the laws. This brings us full circle to the mindset of officers who are trained to survive through individual decisiveness, while firefighters are successful in teams. Given this chasm in mentalities,

duties and job task requirements, can the disparate functions be blended into one agency?

This answer is yes.

The White Plains Public Safety Model

The key to success of the public safety concept is the collaboration and coordination of the public safety discipline led and managed by a Director of Public Safety and a cross-trained Command Staff. Typically, police and fire departments in the same city fight for their share of the general fund monies. This battle often creates tension and a ‘winner takes all’ mentality leaving the police chief and fire chief at odds. There are many such examples to draw upon in the public safety community. One such example is the City of White Plains Department of Public Safety, New York. Prompted by the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and the public health issues posed by the avian flu, White Plains public safety officials knew they “must think differently and explore alternative models to respond to, and mitigate a crisis”¹. In 1997, White Plains combined police, fire and emergency medical services under the command of a single commissioner. This system is built on the Unified Command and Communication System. The system is very successful, building upon a collaborative approach to service provision and emergency response.

The Rohnert Park Model

The Public Safety concept is practiced only by two public agencies in California – the Cities of Sunnyvale and Rohnert Park. The models used in these two agencies are also

¹ James M. Bradley, Chief of Police and Richard L Lyman, Chief of Fire Bureau, White Plain Department of Public Safety, New, (March 2006), “[The Public Safety Model: A Homeland Security Alternative](#)”, The Police Chief Magazine, vol. 73, no.3.

very different. Let's explore how the City of Rohnert Park developed their model, what service options it offers, and how it deploys the Public Safety Officer (PSO) concept.

The City of Rohnert Park was incorporated in 1962. It is located on the US Hwy 101 corridor in Sonoma County, California about 50 miles north of San Francisco in what is known as the "Wine Country". The population of the city is 43,000; it prides itself as a "master planned" community catering to families and providing a park in every neighborhood. The Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety has 79 sworn officers. The agency has two Divisions; Police and Fire. The Police Division is segmented into traditional bureaus similar to other traditional law enforcement agencies. 61 PSOs are assigned to the Police Division, which includes Patrol, Investigations Bureau, Special Enforcement Unit, Traffic Bureau and School Resource Officer. The Fire Division has a staff of 18 PSOs and is tasked with fire suppression, prevention, inspections, code enforcement, plan review, emergency preparedness and public education. There are no permanent positions in the agency other than the Police Commander and the Director of Public Safety. This encourages PSOs to be well-rounded while maintaining mandated training and proficiency in both the police and fire arenas. PSOs are mandated to transfer between the Police and Fire Divisions to maintain their proficiency.

In Rohnert Park, the initial motivation to move away from traditional models was to save money by cross-training police officers as firefighters. Start up costs for the city was comparable to starting a small police department. The city chose to hire and staff the Department of Public Safety using the traditional police department model to protect a

budding community of about 6,100². The police officers were trained in-house as firefighters. All responses to fires were much like a volunteer agency, where off-duty officers were called back to staff the engines and respond to the fire scene. The department ran its own ambulance service until 1982, when a private service took over on a franchise agreement. The police headquarters and fire station were located in the same building. From the early 1980s up until the mid 1990s, this hybrid model was sufficient to provide adequate police and fire service to the community and save the city about \$3.5 million a year.

During 1985-1995 the city's population swelled from 23,000 to 35,000. The Public Safety model of calling back PSOs to staff fire engines was creating increased response times, and the agency was finding that there was a decrease in off-duty response. After several high profile fires, extended response times and higher than normal fire losses, the public began to demand better fire protection by appearing at City Council meetings and demanding a change in service. This scrutiny came in the form of public appearances by firefighters from other departments who lived in Rohnert Park appearing at City Council meetings. From 1993-1995 there were several City Council meetings in which a coalition of the above mentioned firefighters pushed for a change to Public Safety's response to fire. They demanded fire stations be covered 24/7 with professional firefighters staffing the apparatus. These demands prompted the city to begin staffing the Northern fire station on a 24/7 basis in 1995. In 1997 the city opened another staffed fire station in south end of the city. This left the Southwest Station unstaffed and

² US Census Bureau statistics for 1970 – No statistics were available for 1960-1969 as Rohnert Park was incorporate after the 1960 census was taken.

headquarters staffed by on-duty administrative or overhead personnel during daytime hours.

The Public Safety model has come under scrutiny from the community and City Council for many years due to the lack of understanding of how the system works. Conversely, public opinion and demands have helped sustain and shape the model throughout the 45-year history of the agency. Over the last 15 years, the City Council has ordered several in-depth studies. The Council had two core questions; is the model still savings the city money; and, can officers stay proficient in both professions? The model has withstood these challenges after a series of budget comparisons with similar sized agencies and through an on-going educational process lead by public safety staff via staff reports and City Council testimony. To date, the city still saves an average of about \$1 million dollars a year in personnel costs versus traditional police-fire models.

As the city continues to grow, the Public Safety system faces many more challenges, recruiting new officers who are comfortable with the dual role model and maintaining current officers mandated training and proficiency in both profession and on-going budget considerations. At this point, public safety staff has not identified the “tipping point” when the public safety model will no longer save the city money or if the agency will be able to stay up with training mandates in both professions. If history is an accurate indicator of the future, the public safety model will continue to morph as the community grows and public service needs are identified.

Community Perception – A continuing challenge

The public safety officer is challenged with the positive and negative perception from a large segment of the community. Having worked for Rohnert Park Public Safety and lived in the city for the last twenty years, this author can offer some insight into this perception. Both our new and tenured officers consistently report that community members mistakenly believe there are a “police department” and a “fire department” in the city. This sentiment was verified in service studies conducted by the City in the late 1990’s³. The majority do not understand the public safety concept. Many citizens don’t pay attention to services or issues in their community to fully understand the public safety system.

Public Safety staff has presented the model to the citizen via newspaper articles, neighborhood watch and business forums and through contacts with the public. The conclusion of Public Safety staff is the model is often too complex to initially describe and grasp to their citizenry due to its unorthodox nature. Officers continue to struggle to convey their message effectively, since the model is readily accepted once understood. Interestingly, once the model is fully explained to citizens, they are amazed that officers can do both jobs.

A Diverse Resource

Most of the officers who chose Rohnert Park DPS over other agencies did so due to the dual roles and the variety it offers. The underpinning of the Public Safety model is the

³ Based on results from a Community Policing Service survey conducted in 1997. The majority responded that they thought Rohnert Park had a separate police and fire department.

economy of scale it offers the taxpaying citizenry. The fact that every public safety officer is trained as a police officer, firefighter and First Responder/Emergency Medical Technician offers the public a “total” resource upon arrival at the scene of an emergency.

Public safety officers must maintain a rigorous amount of training in legal matters; e.g., use of force, case law/legal updates, laws of evidence, court procedures, firearms range training, and driver training on the law enforcement side. On the firefighter side of the house, the training is more attuned to hands-on task oriented or repetitive types of training. Supervisors must take a series of Fire Command and Wildland classes that teach proper fire ground firefighting tactics and safety. These challenges must be acknowledged and addressed if one is considering utilizing the public safety model.

Your patience and perseverance will be rewarded. Once the public safety officer is adequately trained, he or she is a dynamic resource at the scene of any emergency that may arise. From the perspective of a taxpayer or citizen in need of assistance for a vehicle accident, fire, medical aid or robbery, the public safety officer is able to transition from police officer to firefighter or visa-versa by simply changing into another uniform. The citizens who are familiar with the concept appreciate the versatility the dual role provides. Oftentimes our staff receives comments personally or through our on-going customer service surveys that praise our officer’s abilities to traverse across the lines of enforcers to that of companionate caregiver and rescuer.

Public Safety – Perception Challenges

The agency has to deal with the fact that other agencies in the county may view them differently. Because the model is different from others, they have to continually prove themselves in incidents where multiple agencies may respond. In years past, Rohnert Park has assigned officers to regional enforcement teams such as SWAT, Gang Enforcement or Narcotics. These officers went into these teams with the “public safety stigma” attached to them. The larger agencies did not readily accept the officers until they had proven themselves by demonstrating their skills and competencies.

In one particular case, a group of Rohnert Park PSOs, all with at least 7-10 years of law enforcement experience, were selected to join the county-wide SWAT Team.

Unfortunately, an opinion soon emerged that they would need training since they were “firefighters carrying guns”. This perception created tension and hindered the working relationship amongst the agencies and was partially responsible for the demise of the regional SWAT Team concept.

On the fire side of the house, Rohnert Park Command Staff/Battalion Chiefs have been present at multi-agency fire ground operations when qualified Rohnert Park Fire Captains have been assigned security roles rather than fire ground command assignments. The reason given was someone needed to provide security to the area and equipment. This puts PSOs into a precarious position when they interact with other county agencies in a mutual aid response or joint countywide teams.

Rohnert Park Public Safety has been working hard to overcome this reputation, but the reality is that the lack of understanding of the public safety concept, even with the perceptions, is a hindrance to building their reputation and hiring new recruits.

Consequently, Rohnert Park officers have much more to prove when working within the different cultures.

Hiring and Retention

When public safety recruiters talk to potential candidates, they find that many are only interested in becoming police officers, while others only have an interest in fire. There are far fewer approaching the public safety recruiters during career days or job fairs due to the lack of understanding of the public safety model or their desire to work for a more traditional police or fire agency. According to Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety Sergeant Arthur Sweeney, who has been the led the agency's recruitment efforts since 1999 and is recognized by POST as a subject matter expert in "Hiring and Recruiting"⁴, recruiters have had many conversations with other recruiters and potential candidates. Based on the contacts, recruitment team members have reported that candidates focus more on the traditional job roles due to misconception and lack of understanding of the public safety model. Another challenge is that a new recruit needs to successfully pass a police academy first, and then complete a fire academy within two years of being hired by Public Safety. According to the public safety hiring and recruiting team, many new candidates do not want to subject themselves to this much work, when public safety officers make comparable wages to other police agencies.

⁴ Sgt. Sweeney sat on several panels for POST and assisted in the development of the April 2006 POST Recruitment & Retention, Best Practices Update report.

The recruiting team has found that more young adults who have an interest in fire are applying for public safety due the wage scale being significantly higher than most fire agencies in the region. Again, the challenge is that normally it takes a person with a different and diverse personality to become a police officer. Public Safety recruiters are finding that applicants who are primarily interested in fire don't have the proper demeanor and character to become police officers, which is part of the dual role of a public safety officer. Sgt. Sweeney reports the rate of hiring to applicants for public safety has increased 1:110 to 1:165 over the last five years. According to Sgt. Sweeney, traditional police agencies ratio is 1:100. To put these figures into perspective, it costs an average \$200-\$1,000 to process an entry level or lateral officer applicant from first contact, follow up contacts, oral interview, and referral to the polygrapher. The cost goes up as the process continues. According to our Sgt. Sweeney, the total cost to process a lateral officer applicant is about \$3,500. It costs about \$5,000 to process an entry level officer.

When a Public Safety agency evaluates a particular candidate for potential hiring, they look for certain skill sets, general common sense and competences, intellect, fitness, and, "agency fit". While many of the candidates will possess the needed skills and competencies to "do the job" many will not have the same values and character that the agency is looking for. The ability to fit into an organization is almost as important as the skills one brings to the table. Many veteran officers who hired on with a new agency oftentimes find it difficult to adjust and conform to the culture of their new agency. As a

result, officers can become disenchanted and demoralized thus finding reason to go back to their old agency or move on. Public Safety organizations face many challenges in the future; specifically recruiting and retention.

Over the long haul, the agency has found that officers tend to stay with the agency and the attrition rate is due to retirements, on the job injuries or for disciplinary issues. About 15 officers over the last 20 years have left the agency to go to other agencies. Of those (15), 5 have returned. During the late 80's and early 90's, returning officers cited the pay, the community and the diverse job as the three main reasons for their return. This opinion has changed; however, in the last decade. Officers now cite the job diversity and working conditions as the main reason for looking for a job change. When asked for a reason for the change in attitude, Sgt. Sweeney stated, "I have seen a distinct change in values and attitude of the new recruits. They are very impatient and want instant results and answers during the hiring process". This attitude change is consistent with the opinion of Irv Gamal, MA, President and CEO of Insights Systems Group. Mr. Gamal describes the new generation, Generation Y, born 1978-1984, as "the first generation of a global society". They are technology savvy, need instant feedback (ala the computer) and are optimistic and self assured. They question authority and value their personal time off. They are loyal to a good boss, but will seek out other jobs if dissatisfied with there current situation.⁵

⁵ Irv Gamal, (July 2006) "Understanding and Leading Generation Y". Excerpts taken from Mr. Gamal's handout at POST Command College Class #41.

Public Safety - Collaboration and Coordination

The public safety model can be used to achieve community public safety by combining all emergency services under one administrative umbrella. In the case of Rohnert Park, the enhanced use of police, fire, emergency services and other public safety resources has resulted in significant cost savings and better service delivery.

An example of this variety of service occurred during the winter flooding in Rohnert Park in 2005-06. Many streets were impassible and other sections of the city were cut off by high water. Some of the on-duty Public Safety Officers were taken out of their patrol cars and put into fire engines to better traverse the high water and provide emergency medical response and search and rescue of trapped people. Although the entire flood event only lasted about 14 hours, the entire incident was managed by one Public Safety watch commander using the Incident Command System (ICS).

Under similar models, Public safety personnel can consolidate the needs of the public and enhance their service delivery by working as a team. The community also gains a more diverse public safety workforce for localized events and disasters.

Summary

The model presented in this article is one of many different ways Public Safety systems can be designed to provide services in your community. The world of emergency services will have to be reinvented as elected officials and police and fire managers

search for service delivery systems that offer costs savings, value, and all hazards approaches to emergency responses.

Public Safety models offer unity of command, as there is one administration for both police and fire. Combining these two professions and the accompanying resources, forces a public safety agency to work synergistically while offering highly trained and versatile first response officers. Cities that currently operate separate police and fire departments must weigh several factors when considering adopting the public safety model. The biggest hurdle is the cultural issue. Police and fire chiefs have years of department cultural norms, values and command and control issues to consider. The task is however, not impossible. Elected officials and city managers must be astute enough to recognize these department traditions and be able to build a team of leaders and managers who are open to new service delivery approaches. Leaders need to take a page from the corporate book and recognize that if budgets are tight and resources are scarce, then a different business model is needed. By homogenizing police, fire, medical and emergency services, the community is getting more value for their tax dollar and enhanced services.