

**REGIONAL CONSOLIDATION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT SUPPORT  
SERVICES**

JOURNAL ARTICLE

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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).**

## Coping With Prosperity

Rural counties and towns in Northern California are experiencing unprecedented growth. This is especially true for those communities that are located along the major transportation corridors of Interstates 5, 50, and 80. Solano, El Dorado, Placer, Yolo, and Sutter counties all had average annual growth rates that were at least fifty percent above the state average for the period of 1990 - 1994, and this rate is projected to continue through 2005.<sup>1</sup> Although growth is sometimes considered synonymous with prosperity, rapid growth can have serious repercussions for the local government agencies that provide public safety services to these areas. A 1994 National Institute of Justice study predicted that rural areas experiencing rapid growth will also experience a disproportionately large increase in crime. In 21 of 23 studies, crime grew even faster than the population, in some cases three to four times faster.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these rural counties, and the small towns within them, are using an aging public safety infrastructure that was not intended to deal with the growing population and resulting demands for service that the year 2005 will bring. Upgrading to the latest state of the art public safety systems entails an expense that most small jurisdictions can not afford. Placer County, for example, is projected to spend between \$19.3 and \$22.4 million in the next ten years to provide county-wide dispatch functions for the Sheriff's Department and ten rural fire departments.<sup>3</sup>

As our society has become more mobile along the nation's major transportation routes, so has crime. Communities that formerly existed in relative isolation are now within easy reach of auto theft rings, drug traffickers from nearby urban areas, and roving bunco and fraud purveyors preying on the retired and the naive. Some reports suggest that rural areas may serve as production sites for methamphetamine, designer drugs, crack, and marijuana.<sup>4</sup> Other reports argue that rural areas have become important transshipment points for drugs destined for urban areas.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, it is clear that the "Andy of Mayberry" perception of rural and small town policing will have to give way to a higher level of inter-agency, regional cooperation to deal with the new threats to the rural lifestyle.

### **The Consolidation Dilemma**

Regionalization or consolidation of law enforcement services has been studied and discussed for more than thirty years as a means to maintain service levels when resources become scarce. There are, however, relatively few examples of successful consolidations to examine, if one excludes simple contractual arrangements between small or newly formed cities and a County Sheriff's department. As early as 1966, the Public Administration Service studied this issue and noted, "...police service is generally considered to be one of the most 'local' of governmental services and even the smallest local governmental jurisdictions like to believe that they can provide at least minimal needed police services."<sup>6</sup>

Local government officials and citizens of small towns and rural counties are reluctant to merge "their" police departments with other similar jurisdictions. In a 1978 study of small police departments, J.J. Norton and G.G. Cowart found that, "Their small size fostered greater intimacy, community identification, public interaction and civic education."<sup>7</sup> Several other studies spanning a twenty year period also concluded that citizens served by small law enforcement departments were more satisfied with the service they received than were citizens served by large departments. A 1973 study by E. Ostrom, R.B. Parks and G.P. Whitaker concluded that, "The citizens living in the independent communities were victims of crime less and received more and better service."<sup>8</sup> Twenty-one years later, in 1994, National Institute of Justice research found that, "..citizens in the jurisdiction of small departments reported less victimization, fewer citizens thought crime was rising, and there were more positive police-community relations."<sup>9</sup> The same study found that, "...'community policing', to which many urban departments now aspire, has been a long-standing practice in rural police agencies."

Leaders of small and rural law enforcement agencies are finding themselves squarely between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Certain growth, the regional nature of crime in the '90s, and the high cost of technology upgrades suggest that pooling resources with neighboring agencies is a logical course of action. Political realities, public expectations, and the sense of "community service" suggest otherwise.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possibilities of realizing the best of both alternatives by taking a regional approach to certain support functions while leaving the rest of the department intact to deliver the traditional law enforcement services at a level that the communities have come to expect. This "behind the scenes" approach to regionalization or consolidation was mentioned in the 1966 Public Administration Service report when it identified recruitment, selection, training, and planning as functions that could operate well in a consolidated multi-agency environment. On the other hand, the report indicated, "Field services are a controversial area for the implementation of coordinated and consolidated police service, primarily because such activities involve the fulfillment of basic police responsibilities that involve direct contact with the public." W.J. Francis recorded a similar finding in an article in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin in 1981. He said, "Many cities and towns do not want to consolidate their police departments with others to create one 'super' agency. It is for this reason that sharing designated services, buildings, and equipment by more than one department can be a workable alternative to total consolidation by those communities not desiring to lose local control."<sup>10</sup>

### **Candidates for Consolidation**

Most law enforcement agencies are comprised of several divisions, some of which consist of civilians or specialists whose function is to perform tasks in support of the field operations staff who are actually carrying out the law enforcement mission of the agency. These "support" functions include

communications, record keeping, training, evidence collection and crime scene processing, evidence and property storage, and fleet maintenance. Some or all of these functions could be provided on a regional level.

## **Communications**

By far the most common support function that operates in a consolidated environment is dispatch services. Many areas are served by a multi-agency PSAP (Public Safety Answer Point) that receives 9-1-1 calls and dispatches any number of law enforcement *and* fire departments that service various communities in the region. These multi-agency PSAPs are at the center of coordinated responses to any type of regional disaster or critical incident requiring a response from two or more agencies.

Small departments can benefit from participation in a regional dispatch center in several ways. Improved operational effectiveness can be achieved by providing better communication, coordination and data sharing among neighboring agencies than could be accomplished through individual centers for each agency in the region. Small agencies can also benefit from the "economies of scale" by pooling resources with their neighbors in the areas of staffing, equipment and technology acquisition, training and operations. Even the individual employees can benefit through greater career development opportunities that would not be available in a small organization.

## **Records Management**

Record keeping and record management systems are other likely candidates for consolidation. These functions work closely with communications, in that data generated by most modern computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems can be downloaded directly into pre-formatted report forms which are stored electronically in records management systems (RMS). Using specialized crime analysis software, investigators from participating agencies can access this information and develop crime trends and patterns on a regional basis. This sharing of data will enhance the ability of officers from different agencies to coordinate their enforcement activities and increase their effectiveness in combating multi-jurisdictional crimes.

In Contra Costa County, California twenty-three separate agencies have linked their individual records systems to form the All County Criminal Justice Information Network (ACCJIN).<sup>11</sup> This allows each agency to query the other's records remotely, without the cost and delay associated with a manual search by the host agency's personnel. ACCJIN represents the minimum level of consolidation, in that it allows "read only" access to each agency's records and requires each agency to keep and maintain their own data systems.

A fully integrated regional records system would consist of a central records server that would house the records of all participating agencies and would require standardized report formats to insure consistency of data collected from the various agencies. This would allow for comprehensive crime analysis

and plotting for the whole region, giving law enforcement officials a more accurate picture of crime in their area so that they can develop more effective plans for dealing with it.

One such fully integrated system has been implemented in Weld County, Colorado. The City of Greeley and Weld County has consolidated and integrated all justice and public safety automation throughout this growing county. Their system provides a fully integrated public safety and justice information system to support Police, Fire, and EMS dispatching across the County, records operations of both the City Police and County Sheriff's Office, and automation for the County Jail and the County District Attorney's Office.<sup>12</sup>

### **Training**

Although the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training already certifies regional training sites for POST certified instruction, local agencies can establish their own joint training ventures to take advantage of "in-house" expertise and local knowledge. A survey of staff in most departments would reveal a surprisingly diverse array of experience and expertise. Topics from computer technology and high-tech crimes to officer safety could be shared on an in-service basis at a local training site.

Studies have found that when officers from different agencies train together, they become familiar with one another's personnel and agency operations. This knowledge lends insight to officers' expectations of other

agencies when they embark on multi-jurisdictional investigations. The shared training experiences foster greater cooperation on the job.<sup>13</sup>

Such training programs could be specifically designed to address problems of regional importance. Avalanche rescue or snow driving techniques would have little meaning for officers in most of California, but these are considered important topics for officers in the mountain areas. These same officers would see little significance in training programs on earthquake preparedness or Asian gang culture, but officers in the San Francisco Bay area would find these topics very relevant.

By participating in a regional training program, small agencies can avoid the cost associated with travel and lodging to send their personnel away to remote training sites. This could result in more training being offered to a greater number of employees, and reduce the cost of man-hours lost to "travel days".

Local community college accreditation and POST certification would certainly benefit of a regional training program. This would give a legitimacy to the regional program and assist officers in earning college credit, as well as presenting some funding opportunities for the program from the state level.

### **Crime Scene Processing and Evidence Collection**

In most small agencies, the patrol officer may be required to collect evidence and process the scene of any crime short of a homicide. While this may have been sufficient for just photos and fingerprints, crime scene

processing and evidence collection has evolved to the point that highly trained specialists are required to take advantage of the advanced technologies that are available. Small agencies can ill-afford the expense involved in training such an expert and buying the state of the art equipment, especially in light of the limited frequency of calls that require that level of evidence collection.

The nationally televised O.J. Simpson trial dramatically illustrated the importance of the proper collection and handling of evidence. With law enforcement integrity coming under ever increasing public scrutiny, many juries are giving less consideration to officers' testimony. This places an increasing dependency on physical evidence to corroborate the testimony of the officers. By pooling their financial resources for personnel and equipment needs with their neighbors, even small agencies can have the services of relatively sophisticated and professional crime scene technicians and equipment to handle difficult and important evidence collecting situations.

### **Planning for a Consolidation Project**

To determine if a multi-agency venture is right for a particular support function, a cost/benefit analysis should be conducted to examine several topics of concern.<sup>14</sup>

First, the existing level of service currently being provided by each agency involved should be identified. This will serve as the "base-line" by which the future levels of service provided by the consolidation effort can be measured. The cost that each agency is currently paying for the existing level of service

must also be identified in order to provide a basis for comparing the relative cost effectiveness of the consolidation effort with the existing costs. If the service is not currently being provided by the agency, then the cost should be estimated for the agency to provide the service for itself.

Next, the format of the consolidation effort should be defined. How will it be organized and administered? As mentioned earlier, this can range from a simple contractual relationship with one agency providing service for another, a combination of agency staffs working in a shared facility, or a full Joint Powers Agreement, wherein two or more agencies combine staff and financial resources to form a new agency to provide the service. As the complexity of the consolidation increases, the level of local control that is retained by the participating agencies decreases. The form that the project takes will be dependent on factors that are unique to each region, such as political climate, financial status of the participating agencies, and their history of working together on previous projects

Once the form of the consolidation is determined, the cost of providing the joint service must be determined. The manner in which the total cost is to be allocated and paid between or among the participating agencies must also be identified. This cost can then be compared to the existing costs associated with the provision of the service by each agency independently.

Finally, the expected benefits resulting from the consolidation effort should be identified. By comparing those benefits and the costs associated with

the consolidation against the current levels of service and cost, agency administrators can make informed decisions on the merits of consolidation for their particular situation.

### **Implementing a Consolidation Project**

Once a support function is identified for a consolidation effort and a feasibility study shows that such a consolidation would be operationally and financially advisable, an implementation plan should be developed to guide the transition from the present state to the desired future state. This plan should also identify the members of the Transition Management Team, which should consist of a Project Manager and select members of each participating agency.

The Project Manager must be well respected, trusted, politically astute, and have a good understanding of the law enforcement support function that is the subject of the consolidation effort. He or she must be a skilled planner who can set priorities and communicate them effectively, and must have an understanding of what resources are available and demonstrate the ability to utilize them effectively. This person must also have good interpersonal skills, including the ability to listen to and understand others, and must be able to remain objective in the face of conflict.

The first task for the Transition Management Team is to identify the key individuals within each of the affected agencies and governmental bodies whose support is critical to the success of the project, including those whose opposition would prevent the project from being implemented. These key players are

known collectively as the "critical mass", and the commitment level of each needs to be evaluated and plans should be developed to increase the commitment level of those who are deemed to be less than supportive.

The implementation plan developed and executed by the Transition Management Team should address four major areas of concern. Those areas are political issues, funding and cost sharing issues, technology issues, and organization and staffing issues.

### **Political Issues**

Local politics and the past relationships that agencies have with each other is the most significant obstacle to a successful consolidation project. According to Steven Buckley, a Manager with the consulting firm The Warner group, "Each agency involved in a consolidation effort has a history and personality that must be recognized and accommodated to the greatest degree feasible..."<sup>15</sup> The Project Manager should strive to reinforce the partnerships among the participating agencies, develop clear goals and objectives for the project, and prevent domination by one of the participating agencies over the others. Vital to this end, is clear and frequent communication between all of the involved parties.

### **Funding and Cost Sharing Issues**

Although funding and cost sharing was addressed in the feasibility study, the Project Manager should insure that the projected budgets are realistic and

accurate. Every detail of the financial aspect of the project should be addressed, including identified funding sources and potential future funding sources like grants or bonds.

Equitable cost sharing formulas should also be developed. These formulas should address the size and demand for service that each agency will put on the consolidation project, and provide for proportional funding levels that accurately reflects each agencies usage.

### **Technology Issues**

Technological concerns for the consolidated project will vary, depending on the nature of the support function. Dispatch and Records Management projects are technology intensive and will require that the Project Manager have some knowledge about radios and computer systems. Crime scene processing is also becoming increasing technical and some special knowledge may be required to implement a consolidation effort in this area as well. Regardless of the technology involved, the Project Manager should understand the needs and requirements of the participating agencies and insure that the proposed consolidation utilizes the appropriate technology to support their overall mission. He should also anticipate future technology developments and plan for future requirements.

## **Organization and Staffing Issues**

Any consolidation project will inevitably result in anxiety and uncertainty among the employees providing that service in the individual participating agencies. It is important for the Project Manager to keep all affected personnel informed of the status of the project and of the possible impacts it may have on them. Project newsletters or bulletins can provide a consistent source of information to these employees. Frequent "user-group" meetings can also be used to disseminate information, and can be a valuable forum to get input from those who are already providing the service to their individual agencies.

## **Obstacles to Implementation**

Before proceeding down an unknown path, the wise administrator will try to identify potential barriers and pitfalls that may lie between the present state and the desired future objective. Some of those barriers could be; reluctance of political figures and agency heads to give up any degree of control over their "turf", community opposition to any merger of services with a neighboring community, a lack of common goals or organizational culture conflicts between agencies, and even the incompatibility of existing systems and the refusal of either agency to adopt a new system. Agencies that have a poor track record of inter-agency participation, inadequate planning, changing political climate, and lack of trust among participating agencies are but a few of the pitfalls which can derail a regional consolidation project.

Some of these obstacles can be avoided, and even prevented, by re-examining the way agencies interact. Agencies can improve relationships with their neighboring departments by taking simple steps, such as:

- Form a group consisting of similar rank employees from the surrounding agencies and meet on a regular basis to identify and discuss regional issues.
- Develop regional multi-agency training activities to improve inter-agency interaction during mutual aid situations and promote cross agency communication at the line and supervisory levels.
- Check with surrounding agencies when making major purchases or planning new programs. They may have already tried the same product or program and may have good advice to pass along. They may also be considering the same product or program, and this could present an opportunity for a collaborative effort.
- Take advantage of every opportunity to improve upon the level of trust and communication among the surrounding agencies. These are the foundations upon which successful collaborations are built.

## **Conclusion**

Increasing demands for service and heightened community expectations are compounding the effects of shrinking budgets for many smaller law enforcement agencies across the United States. Even those departments who

are not experiencing financial difficulties are looking for innovative ways to increase the effectiveness of their operations. Consolidating certain support functions with neighboring agencies holds the potential for improving service levels, updating aging technology systems, and reducing overall costs to the individual departments.

Consolidation projects require extensive planning, cooperation, and trust among the participating agencies. Affected employees need to be kept informed and their support should be sought by providing them the opportunity for input into the process.

Administrators can prepare their agencies for successful consolidation efforts by encouraging their staff's interaction with their counterparts in neighboring departments. These efforts will lead to increased trust levels between departments and improved cooperation, even if there is no consolidation project planned.

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