

REGIONAL CONSOLIDATION OF INVESTIGATIONS BUREAUS;
CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION

ARTICLE

By

Michael Loughran
Napa County Sheriff's Department
Command College Class XXX

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Imagine if you will, a community where the police investigations unit is a consolidation of four different departments' investigators and where the efficiency of the investigations is a model for other agencies to follow. A place where investigators communicate openly with each other, share their information and cooperate with each other helping catch the crooks... Sound like the twilight zone? As law enforcement enters the 21st century, old practices need to be examined and perhaps cast aside. This article will examine the consolidation of investigation bureaus and suggest a methodology for implementing a consolidation plan.

The tax paying public demands efficient use of their tax dollar. The face of crime is changing and law enforcement will need to adapt to continue being effective. As agencies look for more efficient ways to combat crime and share their resources for effective crime fighting, consolidation of certain services may be an option.

Merging criminal investigation bureaus can be particularly effective for smaller agencies within a specific geographic area. A recent study examined the concept of regionalized detective bureaus in a small rural county in northern California. The examination included a strategic analysis and implementation plan. That study is used in this article as an example of a suggested consolidation process.

Imagine the following scenario: The Regional Detective Unit finished their morning briefing and was preparing to execute several search warrants simultaneously. They had been working for weeks to unravel the puzzle of who was involved in the organized attempt to hack into the bank accounts of several major winery owners. It was obvious from the beginning that more than one person was involved. The computer crimes specialists in the unit had quickly identified the tags left by the uninvited visitors and then traced them to the "real persona". The various members of the unit have conducted surveillance until enough evidence was gathered for

the warrants. The detective from North PD knew the suspect in their city as a harmless follower of the local hackers group that the unit had been watching from time to time. The detective had received some great information that when shared with the South PD detectives connected this suspect to the two that had been working in their city. The unit had enlisted the aid of the French Computer Crimes Squad since one the suspects had opened a bank account at the Banc Francaise and was obviously connected to someone over in that country. A search would be conducted of the French suspect's home at the same time as the warrants were executed in town.

The warrants were served and more than enough evidence gathered to ensure that the suspects would face justice. In fact, evidence of other crimes the trio had committed and ties to organized crime syndicates in the Bahamas was also revealed.

While celebrating their success, the detectives commented on how successful they had been since their inception five years ago. "We never used to share information because we wanted to be the agency that made the big arrest and claim the credit. Now we're sharing information and resources. Even the small cities that can't afford more than one detective get the benefit of having this teamwork on any of their major crimes. It's been a boon since Governor Smith signed that legislation giving consolidation grants to law enforcement agencies."

Sound far-fetched? While not yet a reality, consolidations of this type will become more common as the new millennium evolves. Although the latter part of the 20th century has been a time of plentiful resources for law enforcement, the pendulum can swing in a different direction at anytime. Although there is little evidence to support consolidation as a money saver, scarce resources are often the driving force behind consolidation attempts.

Police agencies work specific geographic jurisdictions. It is no secret to any police officer that criminals pay no mind to these boundaries. It is not uncommon to find that one suspect has

been victimizing people over a wide, multi-jurisdiction area. Nor is it uncommon for a detective to hear that other agencies are investigating the same suspect he or she is focusing on. Police agencies and their investigators often do not have the time, inclination or communication system to share their information. Inter-agency rivalry, friendly or otherwise, may also play a part in the lack of communication.

Most police agencies in the United States are considered small, based on the definition used by the FBIⁱ. Those agencies have fewer resources to deploy in any investigation than does a larger department. It is possible that some investigations are incompletely investigated as a result. Merging resources for an investigation is not new. It has been done for specific task force operations, special teams and even for individual crimes of large magnitude. It has generally proven a successful practice that uses available resources efficiently.

History of Consolidation

The effort of law enforcement to consolidate their resources goes back as far as the 1930's. The post depression era brought a scarcity of resources and a decreased trust in government. Agencies were forced to focus their law enforcement resources on prohibition laws. The public was demanding improved law enforcement. Criminals became more mobile and the public demanded protection.ⁱⁱ

Few attempts at consolidation of police services were made over the next few decades. The mergers of Miami and Dade County, Florida, Jacksonville and Duval County, Florida and Nashville and Davidson Counties in Tennessee are notable exception. All took place in the late 1950's and 1960's. As more small departments came into being, more calls for consolidation were heard. The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals recommended that consolidation should be considered by every agency if it would mean the

increased efficiency and delivery of services.ⁱⁱⁱ The commission directed agencies to seek reforms that would lower costs and provide the same or better level of service. It suggested different levels of consolidation be studied.

Since then, many agencies have consolidated entirely or targeted one or two specific services. Pennsylvania has been a leader in regionalized policing. That state started its consolidation efforts in the early 1970's and now has over twenty-eight regional forces serving in the state. Another noted consolidation was the merger of the Las Vegas Police Department and the Clark County Sheriff's Office in Nevada in 1973. The Governor of Nevada signed legislation deactivating both departments and creating the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Force. A recent resident survey was commissioned and the result showed an overwhelming level of support for the existing metropolitan force.^{iv}

Other departments have joined forces and formed partnerships to deliver some of the more specific services provided by their agencies. These include combined dispatch centers and records centers as well as the trend toward inter-agency task forces formed to combat a specific crime. These often operate on partnership plans where each agency simply contributes an agreed upon resource to the unit. Consolidation has and will continue to be a popular method of streamlining bureaucracy and some believe that, as resources become scarcer, will increase in popularity.

Does Consolidation Live Up To its Merits?

Consolidation is often marketed as a money saver. Literature reviews fail to support that belief. Studies conducted of the Miami-Dade merger and the Jacksonville-Duval County merger showed that spending levels had actually increased after the mergers of the respective

departments. Similar results were found in a post merger study of the Toronto Provincial Police in Canada.^v Despite these findings, direct economic impact seems to be the driving force behind many consolidation movements. Support has been directly tied to the level of dollar benefits that are advertised.^{vi} A desire for efficiency and improved service delivery should also be one of the primary forces driving consolidation efforts.

What does the future hold?

The study of a detective consolidation proposal should begin with an identification and analysis of the trends likely to impact the delivery of service and the formation of single detective bureau in a small rural county.

In the California study on consolidated investigations, a panel of citizens forecast several trends and events that they felt were likely to occur in the next ten years and that might impact such a merger. The most significant of the trends and events were the emergence of high tech crime, an expected increase in the crime rate, the increased complexity of crimes and of those committing them, a major computer related crime targeting local businesses, the issuance of pro-consolidation grants and the existence of an unsolved serial crime pattern occurring in the area.

Once the forecasted trends and events are identified and ranked, a cross impact analysis is completed on them and likely scenarios are developed. From these scenarios comes the next step of the consolidation, the strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning Process

Managers need to identify how they will implement the merger, where they can expect support or opposition and how to overcome any resistance to change. Strategic planning will help them do this. The process includes an analysis of the environment, stakeholder

identification, goal setting and development of an implementation plan. The plan should consider a desirable future state in the five to seven year ranges.^{vii} It will guide the organization through the process and serve as the road map that the organization can use to achieve the goal of consolidation.

In the sample study on consolidation of detective services, an analysis of the environment was conducted. The area being considered for the consolidation project has four separate law enforcement agencies that assigns personnel to criminal investigations. Geographically, the area is small and considered ideal for such a merger. The overall crime rate is not extremely high in comparison to nearby counties with similar demographics.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the proposed merger were identified. Some of these included the strengths of tourism growth, the availability of alternative funding the support for law enforcement in the community, the strong sense of community and the belief that small size promotes good relationships at government levels. Consolidation has generally been supported in the region.

Weaknesses included the potential for opposition by different communities, disagreement between jurisdictions over the administration of the unit, lack of space for the new unit and most notably the perception of the loss of local control

Economic growth, improving the tax base, the need for specialized investigative skills, continued residential and industrial growth, and an increased crime rate were seen as possible opportunities.

The trend toward drug decriminalization, the possibility of a local recession, the loss of contracts for police services and increases in privatized law enforcement services were included in the threats list. Local opposition to the concept was also on the list as a potential threat.

Will the Community support the idea?

The planning process requires the identification of stakeholders. They are those members of the community who might be impacted by the creation of a consolidated detective unit. For this proposal they include but are not limited to the following:

The County Sheriff, Police Chiefs of the involved departments, City Councils and Board of Supervisors, Employee associations, the department's employees, City Managers, County Administrator, Personnel Departments and treasurers, Neighborhood Watch groups, insurance companies, Chambers of Commerce, City and County Counsels, court officers, evidence and property clerks, records and support personnel for the departments, residents and business owners, taxpayers associations, state and local fire departments, and media representatives.

Obviously, some of these identified stakeholders are more critical to the process than others based on the stake they have in the consolidation and the direct impact it has on them. These are the "critical mass" stakeholders and are identified as: the agency heads, the city and county administrators, citizen groups, elected officials in the affected jurisdictions, the employees groups and media representatives.

Goal Identification

The next step is the identification of strategies and goals. The goal of the study's consolidation is to merge the detective units of the four law enforcement agencies in one county into one investigative bureau through the use of a joint powers agreement. Several goals were identified:

- Conduct effective and efficient follow-up investigation of crimes occurring in the jurisdictions of the member agencies.
- Minimize the amount of duplication between agencies.

- Maximize communication about ongoing criminal activity.
- Improve coordination of investigations in multiple jurisdictions.
- Provide sufficient resources to conduct major investigations.
- Improve the expertise and knowledge base available to each small agency.

Strategy

The involved departments should select a team of managers to serve as a core group to transition to the event. This team will prepare the community and the organizations for the change through public information and education campaigns. They will formulate the joint powers agreement and draft policies for the new unit. A project manager is responsible for overall guidance of the project team and ensuring that the best possible outcome for every community is achieved. The team identifies the stakeholders they will most need to convince to effect the change and create a plan for transitioning to the new unit once approval is obtained.

Change Methodology

Readying the environment for the change is an accepted preparatory step in change methodology. This is accomplished by educating the stakeholders and the public about the benefits that are expected by the consolidation. Some of these include:

- A larger detective unit will enhance training opportunities and the ability to carry out more sophisticated investigations.
- Elimination of duplication of effort by detective units since they are generally working cases on the same people.
- Enhancement of communication between agencies at all levels.
- Ability to address the anticipated increase in more complex crimes with specialized expertise.

Overcoming Resistance

The idea of consolidated detective services may encounter some resistance, but proper mitigation can neutralize the opponents or even change their position to one of active support. Strategies to mitigate any potential resistance include: liaising with city officials and each cities' department heads; establishing media contacts for publicity; conducting educational outreach with all the stakeholder groups; preparing the legal documents necessary; consulting and addressing legal issues surrounding the creation of the unit; and developing the initial operational plan for the unit including determining funding allocations and potential revenue sources.

Commitment from specific groups is vital to the merger's success. The support of department heads and elected officials is most critical. They will need to believe in the consolidation as a win-win situation for all concerned as they will be instrumental in getting the political and public support needed.

A common barrier to a consolidation is the perception that there will be a loss of local control. This concern is consistently voiced by political figures of the different jurisdictions. Simply pointing out the benefits of this program may not alleviate those fears. A possible solution is to create a governing board to oversee the activities of the unit. This board would consist of the representatives of the participating departments. The fact that there will be local representation on the board from all jurisdictions, and a mechanism in place where local control issues can be addressed, may alleviate some of the fears.

One advantage of just consolidating the investigations unit is that the most visible representation of that local control, the uniformed officer, will still be on patrol in the

communities they serve as first responders. The identity of the local police officer will not be lost.

Recommended Transition Team Tasks

Once support is obtained, and a joint powers agreement signed the governing board will need to meet and exercise policy control and oversight responsibility of the unit.

The transition team will need to do the following:

- Develop a timeline for desired implementation. The most frequent error in an implementation plan is an under estimation of time needed. ^{viii}
- Ensure the governing board selects which agency will act as lead in the unit and appoint a command level staff officer to the position. That position will be responsible for overall management of the unit. The supervisory positions will also need to be determined by the governing board.
- Ensure that a spokesperson from the governing board is selected to act as chair. This position can rotate annually within the group.
- Determine staffing levels for investigators, supervision, support staff and evidence processing.
- Determine equipment needs and consolidation of existing equipment.
- Prepare a standardized personnel selection procedure and training plan for members.
- Select a facility to house the unit. This is best if separated from the involved agencies, preferably in a centralized location. Separation will help foster a sense of identity for the unit.
- Facilitate meetings between the governing board and detective bureau staff to define the relationship of one to another and how they will function together.
- Assist the board with the selection and training of any support personnel.
- Assist with the selection and installation of equipment and supplies for initial implementation
- Provide for a feedback system for the jurisdictions managers and elected officials to insure that all complaints and problems are efficiently handled.

- Continuously communicate to the involved agencies the status of the consolidation.
- Publicize and market the new unit to the public.

Continuous monitoring of the unit will be vital to its success or failure. Performance audits can be conducted to determine efficiency and existence of any problems. One critical components for success will be the level of trust established between agencies and between the elected officials. The perception of a lack of service, or inefficiency will lead to the demise of the unit. A meaningful evaluation system is critical.

The role of the transition team is critical to the successful implementation. Commitment levels to the regional concept by all the critical stakeholders will need to be maintained. The establishment of trust and strong communication will establish itself as the most necessary item for success.

Budgetary Issues

As with any program, allocation of resources will be critical. The funding of the unit will need to be split between the jurisdictions involved. The governing board will determine allocation formulas and additional revenue sources. Costs that need to be anticipated include: Staff salaries and benefits, insurance, capital costs, equipment, supplies, training, safety equipment, rent for the facility, utilities and furniture.

A plan to distribute the costs will also be needed. When evaluating consolidation plans, local officials are often concerned how much of their local money is being spent to subsidize another jurisdiction. Arguments over what constitutes a certain percentage of an allocated fee and what is included can be prevented or minimized with clearly defined cost distribution plans.

Such a plan should consider stable factors relating to the demographic, social or economic makeup of the area. If simply based on a per-service fee basis, year-to-year changes

may impact a city's budget. Such occurrences have caused regional policing failures in some areas.^{ix}

Factors that can be considered include population, land area, property valuations, revenues or taxes collected and the crime rate. This last factor is a commonly used one in consolidated operations. It is also recognized as the most directly related to actual police performance than any other.^x Negotiations can determine fair and equitable distribution on one or a combination of any of these factors.

Operational grants are another possible revenue source. The state Office of Criminal Justice Planning and the United States Bureau of Justice Assistance are two funding agencies whose grant offerings should be researched.

Conclusion

The regionalization of detective bureaus in a small rural county is a future state that could be of great benefit to the community. Increased efficiency is a primary force behind such a change. The potential for cost savings should be viewed as an added possible benefit. The future of law enforcement, in our rapidly changing environment, requires that we look at problems in new ways, without being held back by the old way of doing things. We cannot refuse to change because "that's the way we have always done it". Consolidation of services in the government sector has parallels to the merger of private sector businesses. Some succeed, others do not. Analysis of the failures can often be traced back to a lack of strategic planning. In most cases however, the result is a more efficient organization and hopefully a model of efficiency and effectiveness for modern policing.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Federal Bureau of Investigation “Crime in 1999” Washington D.C. (2000) 293
- ⁱⁱ Robert Wiebe, “The Search for Order 1877-1920”. New York: Hill & Wang (1967) 41
- ⁱⁱⁱ National Advisory Commission, Criminal Justice Standards and Goals: Police, Superintendent of Documents, U.S. G.P.O, Washington D.C. January 1973. 155
- ^{iv} Mike Zepler, “Poll Lauds LV Police, Pans Splitting of Force” Las Vegas Review Journal, (10/2/1999)
- ^v *ibid.*, 11
- ^{vi} J.E. Filer “Voter Reaction to City County Consolidation”. Journal of Law and Economics. Vol. 23 1989 180
- ^{vii} Cary Simon- Command College lecture; October 26, 2000 San Marcos CA
- ^{viii} Larry Alexander, “Successfully Implementing Strategic Decisions” Long Range Planning 18 No. 3 (1985) 91
- ^{ix} Regional Police Services in Pennsylvania Governors Center for Local Government Services 5th ed. Harrisburg PA, October 1998 28
- ^x *ibid.*, 30

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