

THE CHALLENGE OF RECRUITING PEACE OFFICERS IN THE FUTURE

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ARTICLE

The recruitment and retention of qualified police officers have been an ongoing challenge for the law enforcement profession. Over the past ten to fifteen years, law enforcement agencies have struggled to find talented, yet suitable, police applicants to fill their vacant positions. During those years, the candidate pool was plentiful and applicants competed vigorously for the few available positions. Law enforcement agencies have relied on slow bureaucratic processes to move candidates through a cumbersome series of screenings. This screening process has been used to weed out the less qualified candidates, with the hope that the cream would rise to the top. Typically, a high percentage of the candidates were deemed unsuitable during the background investigation or the psychological examination. A police or sheriff's department could easily process one hundred applicants to find three to five qualified persons.

In the next several years, law enforcement agencies in California and nationally, will face an ever increasing challenge of finding and recruiting talented employees. This challenge will be compounded by the shrinking workforce pool. By the year 2006, the workforce pool is projected to be 141 million, while approximately 151 million jobs will be available.¹

A significant contributor to the recruitment crisis is the recent introduction of the California Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) retirement option referred to as the 3% at 50 plan. Through this plan and other legislative efforts, retirees are eligible to receive up to ninety percent of their salary. A large number of our law enforcement

employees are from the baby boomer generation. This generation totals 77 million and includes those born between 1946 and 1964.² A substantial percentage of this group is reaching retirement age and many are being quick to take advantage of their retirement benefits. The Generation X population, born between 1965 and 1979, totals 44 million. This generation will be the new officer pool for the next twenty to thirty years.

Law enforcement is not the only profession feeling this pinch. Other fields are experiencing this same dwindling supply of new talent. A study published in 2000, indicated there are more than 600, 000 vacant Information Technology positions in the United States. In the engineering field, the number of graduates from engineering programs decreased thirty-three percent between 1990 and 1996.³ In California, a teacher and nurse shortage has resulted in government intervention aimed at attracting and training people to meet the needs of the state. This chasm in the employment-age population will continue to be a barrier to easy, successful recruiting, well into the 21st century.

Police agencies across the nation, large and small, those with low and high incidences of crime, and those with high and low salaries, are all struggling to hire tens of thousands of new officers in a tight labor market. Law enforcement recruiters are seeking candidates who possess high moral values, dedication to service, community commitment, and team involvement. However, recruiters are encountering a different type of employee. As they sift through a depleted talent pool, they are likely to encounter candidates who have used drugs, are out of shape, lack reading and writing skills, and lie about their past in an effort to land policing jobs. Finding talented recruits

who possess these strong values has become increasingly difficult over the past few years.

There are several factors contributing to the shallow applicant pool. Nationally, the strong economy has resulted in low unemployment and this has taken many of the best and brightest out of the applicant pool. The highly talented job hunters are lured away from a once coveted law enforcement career by more lucrative opportunities. These are often high-tech or business careers that also include high salaries. A culturally diverse and changing population, the mind set and expectations of prospective recruits, and competition from other agencies and private sector businesses are also impacting the efforts by recruiters.

Finding the Next Generation of Police Officers

Law enforcement and governmental human resource departments will have to work collaboratively to develop new methods and strategies to attract people to the public safety profession. While some of the traditional methods might still be useful, contemporary approaches will be vital to filling vacant positions. Expanded use of the world wide web is important as candidates are ever more techno savvy. In addition to job announcements, the web should be used to submit applications, resumes, and communication between employer and applicant. The following key result areas and objectives to address them are vital to recruitment of candidates in the future:

1. How can we more effectively market law enforcement careers?
 - Get police officers in the schools, all grades. Have officers speak to children about police careers and the highlights of the job.

- Develop agency specific videos to be used at job fairs, viewed at schools and colleges. Videos highlight the opportunities and challenges of the profession and agency.
- Involve staff in the recruitment process at the local level. Have them speak about the profession during contacts with members of the public, especially those in targeted groups.
- In addition to selling the department, strive to market the community and area. Join forces with Chamber of Commerce to convince candidates it is more than department choice they are making, it is a greater lifestyle choice. Sell the beauty, cost of living, less traffic, quality of life features.

2. How can we reduce the length of time it takes to process and hire applicants?

- Combine phases of the testing/screening process.
- Create a Central Registry where all police candidates, including those seeking lateral transfers, must register and participate in pretesting. A preliminary background and the results of written, physical agility, psychological and medical report would already be completed and on file. This would be available only to agencies considering the candidates.
- Work closely and as a team with Human Resources staff to process and move candidates through all screenings in timely fashion.
- Assign a mentor to all candidates. The mentor will coach the candidate through the selection process to help them be successful. The mentor will be the candidates contact person and keep them informed of their status.

- Increase use of technology. Written exams could be completed on laptop computers, exams could be immediately scored and results relayed to all parties. Information regarding testing phases and results could be posted on the agency web site.
3. How can we increase funding and resources to improve recruitment?
- Educate politicians and CEO's of urgency of the situation. Work to convince them to appropriate more funds to recruiting peace officers.
 - Get legislators to author state or federal grant programs for funds earmarked specifically for recruitment.
 - Consider and examine appropriateness of using asset forfeiture funds.
 - Share resources made available from POST and all agencies in the region, similar to sharing resources in a Mutual Aid Region.
4. What can we do to improve the public's perception of law enforcement?
- Build the image through a large scale marketing program; involve law enforcement, police academies, college criminology programs, POST, schools, and job training/placement agencies.
 - Develop videos that highlight the positive attributes of the profession and distribute them for viewing at as many venues as possible
 - Hire carefully, train well, instill values, share mission and vision, and demand excellence in an effort to minimize employees engaging in acts or behavior that tarnish the image of peace officers.
 - Like the private sector, strive to be a good corporate citizen. While agencies cannot donate from public funds, police can give back to the

community in many different ways. Enhance the agency's image through good publicity, being a part of the community, pitching in, marketing the organization and public relations.

Once employers have hired an employee, some effort will have to go into re-recruiting them. In other words, implementing incentives to keep them with the company. Good salaries, health care, flexible schedules, child care, and a host of other benefits will be necessary to keep them.

The recruitment issue is not one that will be going away anytime soon. Police agencies will have to rise to the challenge and meet it head-on if they are to be successful. Organizations who fail to do so, will be burdened by under staffing, high overtime costs, ineffectiveness, low morale, and will eventually become stagnant. As always, strategic organizations will thrive by employing new approaches, strategies, initiative, innovation, and consider unconventional means to attract quality employees to their organizations.

As top employers recognize the value their employees provide to the organization, they will have to offer improved family-friendly benefit packages. Although these benefits add up in costs, they also build loyalty, attract candidates, and encourage retention. Examples of such benefits include:

- Long term care insurance
- Daycare cost vouchers or on-site daycare
- Flexible spending accounts for childcare or medical benefits
- Wellness programs
- Educational assistance

- Benefits for domestic partners
- Physical examinations
- Home computers
- Low- or no-cost loans
- Parental leave for one year (for new mothers and fathers)
- Pick-up and delivery of dry cleaning and laundry
- Flexible or compensatory time off
- Flu shots
- Relocation pay
- Alternative work schedules
- Home purchase/apartment leases partially paid by employer
- Orientation/mentoring programs
- Prepaid legal insurance
- Lawn care
- Vacation bonuses
- Summer camps/vacation retreats
- Supplemental home loans
- HUD Officer Next Door program
- Take home cars

The best recommendation for leaders and organizations is to understand the crisis, then implement strategic plans that will work in their respective jurisdictions. In light of the current and future hiring atmosphere, they cannot afford to lose good candidates and definitely cannot afford to hire bad ones.⁴

Endnotes

1. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Economic and Employment Projections," Web site, 1999; available from <http://stats.bls.gov/emphone.htm>; Internet accessed 21 April 2001.
2. Gamal, Irv, "Insight Systems Group," New Leadership Thinking (July 2000).
3. Possori, Al, "Survival Strategies For the IT Workforce Shortage," Executive Directions, (May 2000): 17
4. Saxe-Clifford, Susan, Ph.D., "Applicant pool becomes a puddle," California Peace Officer's Association Newsletter "Network" (October 2000):8

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