

HOW WILL SMALL RURAL SHERIFFS' OFFICES IDENTIFY AND HIRE QUALIFIED  
APPLICANTS BY 2007?

Article

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“Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell them, “Certainly I can” then get busy and find out how to do it.”

Theodore Roosevelt

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

John F. Kennedy

### Introduction

Recruiting qualified entry-level law enforcement candidates is one of the most critical issues facing law enforcement agencies today, as well as in the future. Presently, the majority of law enforcement agencies recruit from the same pool of applicants: military bases, local colleges, regional job fairs and other law enforcement agencies and the community at large. Current recruitment efforts include increased education requirements and the need to attract recruits who are ethnically representative of the communities they will serve. Future factors will also include issues such as specialized skill employees, urbanization and the political environment. Additionally, recruitment efforts need to focus on applicants who possess problem solving and interpersonal skills, honesty, the ability to be a team player, and who are technically competent, self-motivated and physically fit.

As technology advances and the value of problem solving or community-oriented policing increases, the demand for specialized police service also increases. Qualified candidates must be educated, effective communicators who understand the value of linkage to government and community resources. Recruitment of qualified, diverse applicants who can meet the standards of modern policing is a significant challenge (Light, 2000).

The new demands placed on law enforcement agencies have a direct impact on recruiting, as a variety of new skills will be needed to provide an acceptable level of service to the community. With the changing trends in crimes, demographics, technology and community expectations, agencies must be visionary about the way they recruit to provide the needed labor force. Law enforcement agencies must be more systematic and deliberate about the population

they target to fill the ranks. To recruit for the future officer, agencies must answer some basic questions, such as:

- What is currently being done and is it working?
- What are our needs today? Tomorrow? One year from now or five years from now?
- Who do we recruit?
- Who will do the recruiting?
- Where will we find the recruit we have identified?
- How/where will we advertise?
- What incentives will we offer?
- What are the positive/negative internal factors that will affect recruiting efforts?
- What are the positive/negative external factors that will affect recruiting efforts?

It is the mission of law enforcement agencies to protect life and property, preserve peace and apprehend criminal offenders. Law enforcement will be successful in accomplishing this mission only by hiring and training qualified personnel (Law Enforcement Online 2001). Law enforcement agencies of all sizes have similar concerns and face similar challenges when it comes to recruitment. This is particularly true in small, rural sheriffs' offices. There is a sense of urgency to maintain acceptable minimum staffing levels. Agencies must be able to adapt and change from the more traditional methods of recruitment to attain a progressive strategy which will maintain a steady flow of candidates to law enforcement.

Law enforcement is a unique profession. It demands that officers confront the darker side of human nature, to be compassionate when dealing with victims of traumatic life changes, to apprehend criminals, to solve crimes and to remain professional and civil under close public scrutiny (Lippert, 2001). To be successful in attaining these goals, peace officers must possess

certain traits. In his article, "Use of Unauthorized Force by Law Enforcement Personnel: Problems, Solutions," Walter Lippert states, " the profession requires the recruitment of a special kind of person, possession of high standards and personal qualities, a high level of intelligence, a sincere interest in community service, and values reflecting those of the organization." Only with such recruitment can an agency work towards reducing the use of unauthorized force (Lippert, 2001).

Over the next decade there will be a decrease in both the number and percentage of high school graduates who fall within the age range of most police applicants. The severe shortage of qualified applicants may result in some departments being dissolved (Osborne, 1992).

Management philosophy must change if it is going to survive and become competitive in the recruitment business. We live in a period of profound transitions. The changes that are taking place are more radical than perhaps any other changes in history. The challenges ahead are perhaps greater than those presented in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Industrial Revolution, by the Great Depression or by the Second World War. These changes require managers to examine the basic assumptions, or paradigms of reality, for it is likely that the old assumptions about reality are wrong (Drucker, 1999). Everything that affects the performance of an institution, whether or not it is within the organization's sphere of influence, will be an issue of concern in the new century.

Unfortunately, the old assumptions have outlived their usefulness. Organizations must, therefore, rethink the assumptions and formulate new ones, more in line with 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. First, forget the notion that management is business management. In the new century management skills can be applied to activities not traditionally considered business, such as recruitment (Drucker, 1999).

According to Drucker the notion that there is only one organizational form or hierarchy is wrong. There must be a leader in every organization and the organization must have a structure in place. That structure depends upon the nature of the enterprise. One size does not fit all. Drucker states that another dying paradigm is that employees must be managed, employees must be led, and, in addition employees must be treated as if they are volunteers, not employees. Potential recruits want more than a paycheck, they seek interesting and rewarding work, and are inspired by those who lead and not command them (Drucker, 1999).

The idea of having to recruit qualified applicants is foreign to many. After all, it wasn't long ago when it was thought that most people would come to a sheriff's office if they wanted to be a deputy sheriff. It was believed if these people wanted to be deputies bad enough, they would simply wait until they were hired. Times are changing. People entering the job market today think differently. Many people tend to look at entry-level positions as a job rather than the start of a new career. The pool of peace officers has declined in the past decade (Smith, 2001).

A once steady stream of peace officer applicants has dried up as prospective peace officers find their way to other sectors of the labor market. Police agencies are struggling to hire officers for vacant positions while maintaining qualified current employees to sustain acceptable staffing levels (Graham, 2001). However, hiring the right person for the job means more than filling vacant seats in a patrol car. A thorough investigation of each prospective candidate ensures he or she meets minimum standards.

When looking at recruitment, several factors affect law enforcement organizations on a physiological level. First, when staffing levels are low, the overall workload for all sworn officers is affected. There is more territory for each officer to cover per shift. This leads to the following considerations: decreased morale, increase workload and longer shifts, more officers

taking time off due to fatigue related injuries or sickness, decrease of the availability for officers to take earned vacation time, and less time available for officers to attend seminars and conferences to keep their education requirements up to date (Bernal, 2001).

Today's employees expect to change jobs and careers several times during their working lives. Prospective employees today are also better informed. The amount of information available at their fingertips is staggering. As a result, employees are apt to be less patient and tolerant with jobs they find undesirable. Employees today tend to want more and to want it more quickly. When this doesn't happen, they are more vocal about their displeasure.

The job market is changing as well; unemployment rates have been low and jobs have been plentiful. However, in view of the September 11, 2001 incident involving the World Trade Center and the financial impact on the national economy, unemployment hit 5.4 percent, which is reportedly the highest since 1996 (San Diego Union Tribune, Nov. 3, 2001).

Nationally, employment in many fields (including public safety) are experiencing huge retirement based attrition rates. The competition for qualified candidates is very stiff. It is believed it will get even more competitive. Many people are applying for employment at several agencies simultaneously and will accept the first offer. Employers from private and public sectors are using a number of strategies to hire qualified personnel. Paid moving incentives, signing bonuses and delayed hiring programs are seen on a regular basis in advertisements (PORAC News 2000). Competitive pay and benefit packages are now considered key to attracting and keeping good employees. Because of these changes, employers are now having to take their messages to candidates rather than sitting back and waiting for candidates to come knocking at their doors. Care must be taken in the way these messages are presented as well. Perception plays a significant role in the decisions candidates make about potential employers.

The image of a police officer today differs considerably from 10 years ago. People entering the job market today have watched extensive coverage of “worse case scenario” events. Some of these include the Rodney King case, the O.J. Simpson trial or cases where police officers have been convicted for crimes they committed while on duty. All of these detract from the professionalism and respect previously associated with police work. It is reasonable to assume that prospective applicants are taking notice of the media attention given to these events. The manner in which to best train and qualify new police officers remains a subject of intense debate.

A framework called “The Model Precinct” suggests a partnership between police agencies and area universities and colleges that would enable law enforcement agencies to offer a more meaningful method of educating future law enforcement candidates (Greenberg, 1998). This is a program currently used today in colleges, by the military, called Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in which young college students are exposed to military regime.

On September 11, 2001 when terrorists crashed two commercial airliners into the World Trade Center, there were approximately 3,000 people killed and/or missing. Many of these were police officers and firefighters for the city of New York (Imperial Valley Press, Sept. 13, 2001). This tragic incident has placed considerable focus on the importance of police officers and firefighters in our daily lives. This unfortunate incident may ultimately reflect favorably on the recruitment applicant pools of the public safety industry.

Today’s youth are better educated, live at home longer and are wired to the information age. They live in an instantaneous world where information and communication are at their fingertips. Patience is a 56k modem. Recognition and immediate responses are expected. Finding that ideal recruit, one who seeks a long-term career, as society’s peacekeeper is

increasingly difficult. Many administrators yearn for the days when selecting recruits was comparatively simple. The draft and military service were at their peak. Military veterans innately possessing common sense and a work ethic developed through service and maturity were knocking on the department's door looking for work. The economic boom that followed the cash-depleted early '90s created an atmosphere of four percent or less unemployment, a mobile and selective job-seeking population and high dollar return for little initial effort. The private sector caters to this trend by ignoring a work history that shows numerous employers and encouraging separation in lieu of promotion in order to reduce middle management numbers and keep salaries flat. Performance and production equates to bonuses and commissions. The latter is very appealing to a generation that is focused on today and instant rewards.

Law enforcement, on the other hand, requires commitment and effort from the very beginning. The hiring process, alone, is cumbersome and suffers from the tyranny of time. To those entering the current workforce, the once envied assets of law enforcement career – stability, security and long-term promotion – do not compare with the high entry-level salaries, flexible schedules and the casual work environment associated in the private sector. The end result has been a drastic reduction in the quality of applicants in a period of law enforcement expansion.

Administrators have to consider a whole range of strategies to meet the challenges of filling existing vacancies, as well as pending retirement vacancies. The most obvious strategy is to throw money at the problem. Higher compensation for police officers would be one way of luring qualified candidates. Increased allowances could make shift work more palatable. The chances of this are slim, although current officers would support it. Reality and statistical information dictate this is the not the answer or remedy, it can be in other areas. While the

number of qualified youths attempting to enter a law enforcement career has diminished, it cannot be ignored that the future lies with the youth. Law enforcement must recognize the changes in this generation's values and involve recruitment strategies according to those values.

The tactics necessary to lure recruits into policing need not become overly radical or lower the bar to meet the values of Generation X. This is the communication age and it is through communication that the problem may be solved. Young applicants are looking for recognition. This does not come when they are herded into a faceless throng and treated as merely part of a procedure. Recruiting interested applicants who are indecisive in selecting a career may be achievable through a small scale and frequent recruitment testing process. Consolidating and speeding up the handling of applications at one central recruitment center is a lesson to be learned from the private business world (Tate, 2000).

In small, rural communities it is very difficult to attract new candidates. There are several reasons for this. The lower pay scale for law enforcement based on the small or decreasing tax base. The smaller communities do not offer the cultural amenities, such as plays, operas, amusement parks or recreational facilities, or collateral employment for spouses of the officers. Rural agriculture counties are viewed as backwater and they suffer from second and third generation technology. One of the persistent problems facing smaller agencies is that young officers want to get into the fast pace of the action calls. They want to be fighter pilots. Smaller communities offer a much slower paced life style. Some officers refer to it as "life in the slow lane." Calls for service are usually associated with mundane issues such as past-occurred burglaries, traffic accidents and barking dogs.

All hope is not lost for small agencies. They should reexamine the way they do business. Unfortunately, many suffer from paradigm paralysis and are unable to get out of the box. It is

important to remember that no progress can be made without change. Organizations must look at youngsters living in their communities and start cultivating them at a very early age, possibly in junior high school, through school based curriculum and school resource officers, explorer programs and different events.

Small departments need to get back to the basics and sell local departments. It is obvious from the lack of response to the growing needs that youngsters are looking elsewhere for employment.

After careful review of the output from the Nominal Group Technique, there are several strategies that can be implemented in an attempt to reach the preferred goal and answers the questions of, how will small, rural sheriff's offices recruit qualified applicants by the years 2007? If the following strategic initiatives are discussed in collaboration with stakeholders, an action plan of implementation may be developed.

One of the integral parts to a successful management plan is the stakeholder providing ownership and long-term commitment. This commitment on the part of the stakeholders needs to not only be long-term, but also sincere and a high priority within their own organizations.

Many of the stakeholders are the same in each of the three initiatives. Therefore, it would be recommended that an advisory committee be established with oversight of all three initiatives. This oversight committee should be expanded into a legal binding agreement referred to as a joint powers agreement (JPA) between city, county entities and special district entities.

The Sheriff of the County should assume the leadership of the JPA. The JPA should elect appropriate office holders within this board, i.e. secretary, treasurer, and any other appropriate officers. The JPA should have planning, implementation, oversight and auditing review over Initiatives 1 and 2.

A portable office space should be acquired and located at the Sheriffs' facility (due to available ground space and being centrally located). The staffing of the Central Recruitment Center should be composed of a sheriff sergeant, four civilian background investigators and two clerical aides. They should be contract/term employees with the exception of the sheriff sergeant. Term employees are defined as employees who are employed as long as funding from the JPA is available. These term employees should be employed by the JPA. The sheriffs' sergeant should also act as the Academy Coordinator providing liaison to the stakeholders in these initiatives as well as the college.

The location of the Academy should be on property south of Imperial Valley College. Portable classrooms would be placed on the property. The Academy should provide POST certified classes and should also be equipped to provide physical training, operate a high speed driving school and related training needed in the field of law enforcement.

1. Strategic Initiative 1 - Reduce hiring time lines and applicants applying at more than one agency in the same geographic area at the same time.

#### Goals

- Establish sub-committee for rules and guidelines
- Identify central location for receiving applications
- Establish a common entry-level and lateral transfer applications
- Establish and accept a common background information application
- Establish on-line accessibility

#### Stakeholders

- Sheriff
- Labor unions

- Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST)
- Local city governments
- Local county government
- College district
- Local hospitals
- Local doctors associations
- Local or city police chiefs

The objective of establishing a central recruitment center is to receive the applications and do away with duplication of efforts. It is critical that a commitment be received from all the participants that they will subscribe and adhere to the policy. Theoretically, an applicant would go to this central recruitment center, complete the application, which could either be done in person or on-line and submitted to the application center. The central recruitment center would receive and process all of the following:

- Entry-level applications
- Lateral applications
- Background packages
- Physical agility tests
- Psychological testing
- Oral interviews
- Physicals
- Any written tests

When an application is received, it would be screened to be sure it meets the minimum requirements. The application could then be processed up the rungs of the ladder until it arrives

at the point that the applicant has successfully completed the minimum requirement stage. At this point he/she will be placed into the applicant pool.

When a local agency needs a police officer or deputy sheriff, the central recruitment center would be contacted for a list of applicant names. The center, either through their training manager, human resource officer or personnel division, would contact the applicant or make a preliminary job-offering contingent upon successful passing of the remaining requirements. If the applicant accepts, then they would continue with the additional steps that would include the background investigation, physical agility test and things of that nature. A staff member assigned to the central recruitment center would perform these steps and this would, again, provide commonality and consistency in the hiring process. When the steps have been completed, the applicant would be referred back to the agency of request where he/she would be hired or not. If the applicant rejects the job offer for one reason or another, then his/her name would be placed back into the hiring pool for additional consideration. If the applicant fails any of the above listed steps, then in-house staff would review his/her application. There must be a consensus that the applicant would never qualify for employment because of a specific reason, i.e. criminal activity. If this is the case, the application would be purged from the applicant pool.

The primary objective of establishing a central recruitment center is the avoidance of duplication of efforts. It is not uncommon in small rural areas that many agencies will be conducting the same hiring procedures on the same employee at the same time. The intent of this is to provide a one-stop shopping for the employees, as well as the employers. The key to the success of this initiative is that the entities must establish and must agree to adherence to the rules and regulations adopted by the sub-committee.

This will also require an additional commitment of not only financial resources, but also political support from the stakeholders.

## 2. Strategic Initiative 2 - Create a local POST certified law enforcement academy

### Stakeholders

- Sheriff
- College district
- Teachers associations
- Defense attorney's association
- District attorney's office
- City councils
- County government
- Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST)
- City police chiefs
- California Highway Patrol

It was clear the panelists felt that applicants were either being lost or not even captured as a result of the required distant learning demands placed on the applicants when they had to be sent out of the county for their POST training.

Developing, planning and implementing a local academy is not out of the realm of possibility. A sub-committee of the JPA would be formed from the stakeholders. Their mission would be to:

- Locate housing for the academy
- Through POST identify a curriculum
- Locate and contract instructors

- Local police departments
  - Local sheriffs
  - California Highway Patrol
  - Drug Enforcement Administration
  - Local colleges
  - Encumber financial resources and commitment from local governing bodies of the city and the county
  - Establish accreditation through local college
3. Strategic Initiative 3 - Creating higher visibility of sheriffs' officers in the community

Stakeholders

- Local school counselors
- College district
- Unemployment offices
- Chambers of Commerce
- The print media
- Broadcast media
- Civic groups
- Private employment agencies

The NGT panelists identified forty-six trends. The one trend that dominated most of the discussions was the lack of publicity and less than positive image that sheriffs' deputies have. Law enforcement needs to capitalize on the existing resources and develop a sales, plan or public relations blitz.

The sheriffs' office needs to have an open dialogue with the educational institutions in the community. The committee needs to establish a battle plan for active participation in recruitment of applicants. Some of the areas the committee needs to address and have a presence in are:

- High school fairs
- Career fairs
- College campuses
- Explorer posts
- Sheriffs' athletic league
- Public speaking presentations to civic groups, i.e. Rotary, Kiwanis
- Newspaper advertisements
- Television advertisements
- Radio advertisements
- Unemployment offices
- Develop a web site
- Web site to be posted on police cars, billboards and all stationery
- Traveling recruitment team to other academies, colleges and military bases
- Drill team for parades
- Naval air station (military facility)

Initiative 3 can be directed from the Sheriffs' Office Crime Prevention Unit. An existing staff member should be tasked with the sole responsibility of this project. Availability of a recruitment team (role models) officers should be available on demand to make appearances at scheduled events, i.e., job fairs, school programs.

Monthly reports will be submitted to the Sheriff detailing progress and updating the strategic initiative 3 plan.

These three initiatives have been identified as a means to address the issue statement and are products of the Nominal Group Technique.

If any of the three strategic initiatives could be adopted and implemented, it would have a significant effect on the issue statement, how will small, rural sheriffs' offices recruit qualified applicants by the year 2007? Law enforcement executives must reevaluate they way they do business. They must recruit from existing sources within the community and collaborate with each other if they are going to stay in business.

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