

Do Police Officers have to do Everything?

A Look at Police Support Service Outsourcing

By Jeff Dunn

We expect our Police Officers to be able to do everything. They must be able to respond to a scene quickly and take control of whatever situation confronts them. In many agencies, particularly small agencies, they serve multiple roles: that of first responder, incident commander, investigator and evidence technician. When they aren't handling more critical tasks, they may be writing parking citations, handling a call for service where there is no suspect information or writing a report a victim might want for insurance purposes. The officer could be at the police department processing evidence or completing paperwork related to the myriad of duties and calls an officer might handle.

Demands for service are always increasing. The increases may be caused by various factors such as increased population bases, an increase in crime, or changes in the economy. As these demands in service increase, the ability of the local government to hire additional officers usually does not increase at the same rate. For example, the City of Kingsburg, CA implemented a growth limitation ordinance to control the pace of housing development in 2004. A city in the path of regional growth, this ordinance was not implemented to control crime, but to address concerns over a lack of infrastructure. Unfortunately, slowing the pace of expansion might give the casual observer the impression things are "not changing much" and be reluctant to fund added expenditures in public safety as a result, even when a community might experience a spike in crime.

By the time the polical system “catches up” with funding, small problems have often grown, metastasized and become entirely different.

Outsourcing

There are a number of services being provided by sworn officers within a given agency. Outsourcing, the practice of contracting for a service with a private entity or another portion of the same entity, is one way to balance increased demands for service without enhancing one’s funding stream. By “outsourcing” we are simply looking at changing where those services are being provided or who is providing them. This may allow a public agency to provide the same services (or, perhaps better or additional services) while staying within their allocated resources to free officers from duties they may “always have done” to focus on the tasks most closely related to the public’s safety.

Imagine if you were faced with a budget cut. Wouldn’t it be great if you could maintain your level of services? What if you were asked to provide additional services or expand on current service but were not given any additional funding? What if you citizens were demanding faster response times on emergency calls and still wanted you to handle all of the non-emergency calls in a timely manner? These are the types of issues that the outsourcing of police support services could be used to address.

Now, outsourcing is not a “cure all” for every agency and may not be practical for some agencies but it is definitely something you may want to consider. It may be something that is used as a last resort to avoid reducing services. It might be used to increase services without the need for increased funding. Or, it may be a way to prepare for the uncertainty of the future as it relates to increases in crime, increases in call-for-

service, the uncertain economic future of your community or the pressure put upon an agency from the citizens or the politicians.

The demands for service typically increase at a slow rate, often due to increases in population. By the time an agency can typically justify hiring additional officers, they are already behind in maintaining services. Very few governmental agencies hire additional staff in anticipation of increased growth and demands on its services. Some agencies choose to reduce the types of services they provide or the types of calls to which they will respond. To avoid reducing service capacity, outsourcing specific services may be an option for a number of law enforcement agencies.

Outsourcing Alternatives

Although wide-scale outsourcing may not have been a common practice in policing, we do have a history of transferring necessary, but non-emergency, work to less expensive staffing plans. Take, for instance, the use of volunteers as an example of “doing more with less” as an initial blueprint for outsourcing considerations.

According to the San Diego Police Department in an article summarized by the Reason Public Policy Institute in May of 2006 the San Diego Police Department has saved over one and half million dollars worth of man hours through the use of volunteers. In addition to that savings they have added several new policing services and created better relations between the police and the community.¹

Some agencies have been outsourcing various tasks for many years; such as parking enforcement, communication services, or crime scene investigation responsibilities without any problems. Some tasks are just given to other non-peace officer employees within the same agencies while other tasks are given to private sector

¹ www.rppi.org/es204.html “The Success of San Diego’s Volunteer Policing Program”

companies who specialize in a given field. It may be time for all of us to look at what impact the outsourcing of police support services could have on our own agency.

The court system decriminalized parking violations many years ago, inducing public agencies to contract for the processing of all parking citations. Larger entities such as the City of Inglewood created a new division in their City's finance department to process those violations, collect fines, and pursue those violators that fail to pay the required fine. They have grown to a point where they (and not a private company) process parking citations for a number of cities in California. The City of Kingsburg, for example, previously used a police supervisor to manage this function. Their contract with Inglewood frees a sworn sergeant for field duties while actually increasing the effectiveness of managing the City's citations.

Some agencies have even moved away from the parking cite issue totally, contracting with private entities for the issuance of those citations. The City of San Gabriel CA uses a company called InterCon Security to write its parking citations. They have been very impressed with the consistent volume of citations written and the revenue generated by it. The approximate cost of \$10,000 per month the city pays to InterCon Security is well worth it when the average return in revenues is \$80,000 per month². There are also private security firms that are the first responders to a majority of the alarms activated by their customers. Once they arrive, a decision is made as to whether or not the police need to respond. Expanding on the para-police concept, the City of Oxnard California has a contract with Securitas Security Services USA, Inc. to provide uniformed security patrols in the "core area" of downtown Oxnard. They respond to and handle incidents reported by the merchants that do not require a police response. After

² Per E-mail conversation with Lt. Andy Borello with the San Gabriel (CA) Police Department

hours, they respond to alarm calls and make a determination if the police response is required. Since most alarm calls do not really need a police officer, this will reduce the number of calls for service requiring a police response.³

An article on blogsource.com reports the Boston Police Department has outsourced some of its forensic service to a private company after it was discovered an error in fingerprint analysis sent the wrong man to prison for six years. The private company they hired to conduct the work for them had already found another 109 fingerprints that the unit had missed. The outsourcing of the work will be more expensive but should reduce liability costs due to the ability to process more samples in a shorter period of time and with fewer errors.⁴ Another article on WZZM13.com discussed how the City of Cedar Springs in West Michigan is conducting a study to assess the feasibility of outsourcing its entire police department to the local Sheriff's Department. The end result may be they will turn over law enforcement services as one of their neighboring cities in the near future.⁵

With the focus today on Homeland Security issues and interoperability issues for major incidents, a number of regions are evaluating the potential to consolidate and outsource some communication functions. One issue is the familiarity a local communication center and its employees will have with the people they serve. Future communication centers may be large regional centers with several area satellite centers ready for operation during busy times of the day or major events. Those major events could either be preplanned, non-emergency events, disasters, or terrorist related incidents

³ Per E-mail conversation with Commander Tom Chronister of the Oxnard (CA) Police Department

⁴ www.blogsource.org/2005/04/police_unit_out.html "Police Unit Outsourcing Forensic Work"

⁵ WZZM13 ONLINE, 07-06-06, by Matt Campbell

A panel convened in October 2005 during a Nominal Group Technique process held in Kingsburg California to discuss this topic. The panel members made a number of observations and comments. Amongst them was the thought about the change that occurs among administrators and politicians. They noted some administrators or politicians resist any effort to change or to give up some area of responsibility. The administrator or politician may realize that they will be held accountable for any errors within a given area such as an evidence room or problems with parking citations, thus potentially hampering efforts to outsource sensitive duties. Out of a fear of lawsuits or other claims they want to make sure the best person is running that program for them. In many cases they believe that the best person for the job is a police officer and not a civilian. The panel agreed that police officers would be better trained and could potentially prevent lawsuits if assigned to any core function, even though their costs were higher. Certainly, any move to outsource might also entail discussions with employee groups who might perceive a threat to their job status. Looking at all the issues involved, it is instructive to take a look at a real-world example of outsourcing considerations during the creation of a new agency, where there were no obstacles to “breaking the mold” to change one’s method of business. Such a case example exists in the City of Citrus Heights CA.

Citrus Heights California: A New Police Department

The City of Citrus Heights broke off its contract for police services with the Sacramento County Sheriff’s and started a Police Department within the last year. According to Christopher Boyd, the Chief hired to create the department, the City Council looked at the potential for outsourcing. The end result was they wanted to have the department be all inclusive, and they chose not to outsource various services. They

had considered the outsourcing of communications services, parking enforcement, and some investigative type services. The parking enforcement would have to have been provided by a private company while the other services would have most likely been provided by the local sheriff's department. During the initial phases they were forced to outsource the required backgrounds to get the initial staff hired. They had also outsourced most of the initial Human Resources functions due to the size of the task that needed to be done. The city staff handled some of the tasks while a number of private companies handled the rest. Once the department became fully functional, they are limited to outsourcing just the processing of parking citations.

During the developmental stages of creating a new police department, they considered, used, and abandoned various forms of outsourcing. Their example might be instructive to others who may wonder what forces might impact them should they consider similar changes. From this example, as well as the experiences of others, there are a number of options to mull over. The following section notes just some of the major ones to use as a starting point.

Outsourcing Options

OK, you are convinced you may need to look at outsourcing options in your agency. Where to begin? Here are just a few thoughts...

Community Services Officers: There are a number of tasks suited for transition to paid or volunteer Community Service Officers (CSO). The use of a volunteer would result in 100% savings in the cost associated with the time and salary spent on a police officer to complete a specific task. The use of a paid Community Service Officer would

result in a savings of the difference in the salary between the CSO and the sworn officer freed for other duties. During a panel discussion on outsourcing one of the panel members felt that hiring two paid Community Service Officers would be a better idea than hiring an additional police officer. Their reasoning was that it would increase the number of uniformed personnel driving police vehicles around the community and the general public wouldn't know the difference between them and a police officer. They also felt that it would provide the police department with more employees to handle the non-emergency calls for service that account for most of the calls for service within the City of Kingsburg.

Data and Documents: Outsourcing a task such as the preparation of some documents or electronic data issues could potentially be outsourced to an entity away from the jurisdiction or even to a company in another country. With the availability of document scanners and the internet private companies or individuals in remote locations could be used to reply to public requests for reports or insurance company requests for documents. Requests from allied law enforcement agencies for reports could be processed by these remote sites. In keeping with legal mandates concerning the accessibility to criminal offender records and information the people providing these services would have to be properly screened and trained.

Polygraphs and Background Investigations: Some current examples of outsourced services include background investigations and polygraph examinations. Experienced investigators, most often retired police officers, can provide pre-hire background services with a high degree of efficiency, often in a manner that is more timely and more thorough than an agency's own employees.

Police vehicle maintenance: Rather than taxing city resources for police vehicle maintenance, the service, repair and upkeep of your fleet may be fulfilled by a private entity in your community. This has the added benefit of helping the local economy and strengthening relationships with business partners in your city.

Dispatch and Parking Services: Currently, the two most commonly outsourced services in our field are processing parking citations and dispatch/computer dispatch programs and systems. These have been discussed at length, and are worthy of any study to limit costs and increase effectiveness.

Outsourcing the Agency: Some agencies have gone a step farther than outsourcing some services, and have outsourced the entire police department to another agency. In a cost comparison of potential costs savings conducted by Privatization.org they showed the potential for cost savings when comparing what they called “In-House” versus “Intergovernmental Services” such as contracting with another agency. The cost per capita for the City of Tustin CA (In-House) with an approximate population of 51,000 people was \$160 per person compared to the City of Lake Forest (Intergovernmental Contract) with an approximate population of 52,000 where the per capita cost was only \$90. Another comparison was between the City of Brea (In-House) with a population of about 34,000 and a per capita law enforcement cost of \$140 where the City of Dana Point (Intergovernmental Contract) with an approximate population of 32,000 has a per capita cost of \$115.⁶ These cost comparisons would tend to show that a city could save anywhere from 18 percent to over 40 percent if they outsourced services. This is strictly a cost savings comparison and does not take in to consideration the potential differences in the services being provided.

⁶ Privatization.org “Policing Services”, 2- Cost Savings Potential

Political Considerations

Another reason to take a look at the potential benefits for outsourcing now is that politicians and administrators may now face constraints and fiscal considerations not present in former years. This might tempt an elected official or appointed administrator to look at the issue in one dimension, the fiscal, as they assess the retention or transition to outsourcing of particular public safety duties.

Some police departments may be in more remote areas that do not have private sector companies who can provide specific services, or are faced with companies who can perform a function, but not in that geographic region. Tasks such as parking enforcement, crime scene investigation, and crime prevention duties require someone close at hand and do not lend themselves to be outsourced to a company in a remote location.

Some private sector companies have expanded and moved into providing services to law enforcement. Some individuals, such as retired peace officers, have created job opportunities for themselves based on their knowledge of law enforcement and what is needed. A retired police sergeant for the City of Selma, for example, opened “Central Valley Live Scan,” a business providing fingerprinting service to the community, local law enforcement agencies and area police academies. He built his business from expertise gained as a peace officer, and then saw an opportunity to fill a gap in service demand in this arena. A retired sergeant from the Fresno County Sheriff’s Department opened his own business providing polygraph examinations to local agencies and private corporations. Another person formerly with the Reedley Police Department who had also worked for the Fresno County District Attorney as an investigator is now operating a

private investigation firm providing background and internal affairs investigative services to law enforcement agencies around the central valley. Each of these individuals built their businesses from the foundation of the training and experience they gained as peace officers.

When it comes to outsourcing some people see it as an all or nothing venture. Some members of the panel discussion felt outsourcing only specific services would be troublesome and that all support services may need to be outsourced. In the article on Cedar Springs Michigan,⁷ there was no mention of an attempt to outsource only specific services. It appeared the study's purpose was intended to support or reject a recommendation to transition all policing services to the local sheriff's department. Turning all law enforcement services over to another agency may reduce some problems and concerns; however, city leaders should also know the pros and cons of divesting any control over "how things are done" within their community.

Outsourcing has gone in and out of vogue in the public and private sectors. In an article titled, "Outsourcing's Ups and Downs", the writer makes a reference to only a four percent increase in satisfaction with outsourcing deals within the technology sector, while there was a 10 percent increase in buyers who were unhappy with outsourcing contracts. In the same article, the writer indicated, "...about half have canceled contracts, up from 21% a year ago".⁸ This was in reference to the Tech executives who like the savings and expertise they get from outsourcing, but they still canceled various contracts due to dissatisfaction with outsourcing functions in their organizations.

⁷ WZZM13 ONLINE, 07-06-06, by Matt Campbell

⁸ developerpipeline.com, 06/13/05, "Outsourcing's Ups and Downs", via InformationWeek, by-Eric Chabrow

Many who support this type of outsourcing are only looking at the financial impact for their company. Most that support this type of contracting do not make any mention of the negative or positive potential consequences, on quality of service. Some Sheriff's Departments will contract with a city and operate from a sub-station like Lake Forest in Orange County California or the City of Solvang in Santa Barbara County California. In Fresno County, the Sheriff's Department has contracts with some cities to provide basic emergency responses with one patrol deputy working for a set number of hours per day. Most of those communities would prefer to have additional coverage. The City of Orange Cove is looking at ways to fund the added cost to increase the patrol coverage they get from the Fresno County Sheriff's Department. In many cases the level of patrol coverage provided will be based on the dollar amount of the particular contract.

In another article on abc.net.au/pm/stories, the New South Wales Police Commissioner is considering outsourcing what he considers "non-core business" to the private sector. He is suggesting that the private sector be responsible for noise complaints, parking violations and investigating its own white-collar crimes.⁹ The Commissioner is doing this to develop a holistic approach to crime reduction by getting all aspects of a community to accept responsibility for crime prevention. This would place an additional burden on the general public, private businesses and non-government agencies.

In short, the workforce is out there. There are a lot of individuals who have the skills to start a company and find people qualified to do the work law enforcement wants done. The task at hand might be to match capacity with need in a manner benefiting all concerned.

⁹ abc.net.au/pm/stories/s221856.htm, 07-26-06

Conclusion

No one should argue the point that saving tax dollars is an important issue. Law enforcement agencies, especially smaller ones, are often tasked with “doing more with less.” The outsourcing of selective support services may save some money while maintaining services. The outsourcing of an entire department may save even more money, but at what cost? People in smaller communities, such as the City of Kingsburg, have come to enjoy and expect a more personal level of service that may be lost in the trade off to save money through the outsourcing of the entire agency. A number of years ago, a few citizens within the City of Kingsburg wanted to disband the Police Department and outsource all law enforcement services to the Sheriff’s Department. Once they realized how little control or input they would have over those enforcement functions, they changed their minds and decided the local Police Department was in their best interest.

One of the primary benefits to outsourcing is the cost savings of an officer’s salary and benefit package. If the outsourcing is done effectively, there should not be any real adverse effects. No one should lose their position and there should not be a reduction in services. In most cases, outsourcing is not something that could happen overnight.

As agencies are routinely asked to do more with less, outsourcing could be the answer. Remember, Police Officers may not have to do everything.

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