

ARE CALIFORNIA'S SMALL CITY POLICE DEPARTMENTS GOING EXTINCT?

Article

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For many years, California law enforcement agencies were largely immune from budget reductions and shortfalls. The 70's, 80's and most of the 90's were years of prosperity for law enforcement budgets as the fear of crime and the growing demand for Community Policing resulted in expanding policing budgets, even when the economy was not moving in the same direction. Due largely to increases in crime, both locally and nationally during these times, policing generally were granted most, if not all of the requested increases with little and no justification required. That is no longer the case; the "new normal" is resulting in a wave of major changes among small police agencies nationally and throughout California. What appears to be the trend is the wholesale restructuring of smaller police agencies into regional programs and the push to move is a matter of survival. This is a trend that likely will not stop; it is one that is necessary for the fiscal survival of policing for many of our communities throughout the State.

Hey Chief, Just do it!

The future of policing in California is changing rapidly; success or failure will be dependent upon the individual municipality's ability to continue to deliver service and keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated nature of crime. Although this is an issue facing all law enforcement agencies, it is particularly significant for small police departments due to limited human and financial resources. Larger agencies tend to shift people and money from other types of services to attack problems as they arise. This is a short-term solution, but one not generally available to small cities. As our citizens demand governmental efficiencies and plans that are open to public scrutiny, many smaller cities may find themselves ill-prepared to provide police services in the future.

According to a study prepared by Law Enforcement Executive Institute, law enforcement officials in small towns face a variety of constraints that limit their ability to develop effective policing strategies and increases in the incidence and seriousness of crimes, financial limitations, and structural constraints are forcing small town police chiefs to explore alternate ways of providing police protection services.ⁱ As a point of reference, American law enforcement consists of thousands of independent and relatively small police agencies. In fact, of the 12,668 local police agencies in the U.S., 89.5% employ fewer than 50 sworn officersⁱⁱ and the average size of all police departments in the U.S. is around 25 officers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The issues are fairly straightforward; however, the solutions are much more complex. Arguably the economic downturn caught the country unprepared. Poor planning, shrinking budgets and fewer funding sources is forcing many police agencies, particularly smaller ones, to restructure their service delivery methods or perish.

President Obama's Chief Performance Officer, Jeffrey Zients, addressed a meeting of the Center for American Progress in (month, year) where he explained how the U.S. government must and will "do more with less". Logically, local governments are facing the same task. Even minimal staffing reductions for small police departments, though, could translate to 15-20 percent of their overall work force. The Fraternal Order of Police estimates that since 2010, 12,000 to 15,000 sworn police officers have been laid off nationwide. In 2008 the national average of police officers per 100,000 population was 250. By 2011 that number had dropped to 181, which is an average staffing reduction of more than 25%.^{iv} Couple these issues with an expectation from the public that service delivery remain at levels they have grown accustomed to, one can see how small police agencies may find themselves in a struggle to survive. To make

matters worse, the potential elimination of support from the State will significantly impact service delivery as well. These quotes from California newspapers tell the story; “The California budget woes may force the elimination of 50% of the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement agents and the elimination of the task force approach to narcotics enforcement. This will force local agencies to choose between social programs and enforcement issues as it is starting to look like they can’t continue to do both”.^v “San Diego County law enforcement agencies meet to discuss alternative methods of delivering services in the wake of cuts from Sacramento that will burden local governments with more responsibilities without the state funding to support them”.^{vi} It seems clear to count on the State as a continued future funding source is not a viable option.

But “We the people” understand , right?

According to a September 2011 article in City Beat (Cincinnati, Ohio) The push of the past to maintain police officer jobs as a priority seems to be less and less of a concern to the public as they see their personal income shrinking and find themselves more personally impacted by a struggling economy. The expectation for governmental efficiency is at an all-time high, and people will continue to expect the same level of service with fewer police officers and less money. They are increasingly less sympathetic to the challenges those demands present.^{vii}

Also clear is the seemingly overwhelming consensus that taxpayers are unwilling to continue to be creatively taxed to supplement ailing local government budgets. According to Dr. Raghu P. Mather in a January 2012 article in The California Political Review, “Taxpayers should not support any tax increases of any kind until our elected officials provide us compelling data on their most efficient use of all financial resources and their results. Until we hold the feet of our elected officials to (the) fire and hold them accountable, be assured that any tax increases

will continue to be wasted. So far, Governor Brown (CA) has not provided us with any convincing data, arguments or results. We should not and will not be fooled. While taxpayers prioritize their living expenses on a daily basis, our state programs and services seem to enjoy eternal life and endless spending. There is something terribly wrong with this picture!”^{viii} It appears clear the public is unable and unwilling to provide new financial resources to local government (including the police) to maintain service delivery levels, much less increase funding for new staffing.

So, what do we do?

Nationally, police departments are struggling to get out from behind the change curve. Many small agencies have chosen to dissolve their municipal police departments all together, often opting to contract with their county’s sheriff’s department. Depending on the area of the country and what is minimally acceptable to the controlling body (politicians), this alternative can be less of a financial burden than maintaining a stand-alone police department. This only solves part of the problem in some jurisdictions because the governing body (local politicians) typically lose a great deal of control of the policing efforts in their cities as the deputies under contract are ultimately beholden to the Sheriff and his/her policies and procedures. All of these issues are giving considerable traction to shared services, regionalization and consolidation.

Regionalization/Shared Services

So, if we felt our current agency service model and size were inappropriate for the emerging fiscal landscape, what can we do? One option is the sharing of services by regionalizing under Joint Powers Agreements (JPA) with neighboring jurisdictions. This has allowed some small and mid-sized cities to maintain a measure of control over their police

departments. Faced with the demand for high levels of service delivery and significant budget cuts, jurisdictions throughout the country have found some relief by joining forces. In California one doesn't need to look too far to find examples of shared services, regional projects and consolidation of municipal policing. Several months ago in the small town of San Anselmo, California the City Council approved a contract to share support and dispatch services with the Twin Cities Police Authority. The move is set to save San Anselmo over \$200,000 a year immediately in personnel costs and another \$25,000 in equipment savings in coming years. As of February 22, 2012, San Anselmo and Twin Cities Police uniformed patrol officers have been merged into one patrol force providing preventative patrol and emergency and non-emergency response to the towns of San Anselmo, Larkspur and Corte Madera.^{ix}

In Pasadena, California the Police Department leadership could read the tea leaves more than a decade ago. The Pasadena Police Department has been providing contract regional air support under a Joint Powers Agreement to most of the San Gabriel Valley police agencies for years. Since 2000, under Chief Bernard Melekian, the department expanded its air operations by creating the Foothill Air Support Team (FAST). Working with nine other cities to provide air support since those cities could not afford it on their own. Cities participating in FAST with Pasadena are Alhambra, Arcadia, Azusa, Covina, Monrovia, Glendora, San Marino, South Pasadena and West Covina. Each of the nine cities provides a Tactical Flight Officer, whose duties include observing, monitoring radio frequency for all participating cities, navigating and coordinating ground units.^{x11} According to Glendora Police Chief Rob Castro, "the cost for the (police helicopter) service is \$34,000 a year; a much more economical choice since contracting with L.A. County Sheriff's helicopter service would cost the city \$6 a minute. On a big call, that can add up pretty fast".^{xi}

In an April, 2011 article in Law Officer Magazine, it was noted that the only way for small to mid-sized police agencies to avail themselves of aviation technology through helicopter patrols is through a local regional approach.^{xii} In a 2011 survey conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), 25% of respondent agencies referenced multi-jurisdictional arrangements their department was undertaking to promote cost effective service deliver.^{xiii} Nationwide, municipalities are joining forces by either sharing services or totally consolidating all of their police services in an effort to eliminate waste and duplicity.

Consolidation

As indicated in an article in Pennsylvania's Doylestown-Buckingham-New Britain Patch, budget concerns and shortages of revenues in the State have forced politicians in Central Bucks County, Pennsylvania to consolidate three police departments into one as local Town Councils and Mayors hammer out the details. So far the towns have held seven packed house meetings to answer public questions and manage community concerns.^{xiv} In neighboring New Jersey, Governor Christie has held ongoing discussions regarding consolidation of the State's three largest municipal police departments. The Mayors of those cities concur that these discussions are 20-30 years overdue, and that the current financial climate has force the issue to the forefront.^{xv}

The Governor's push in New Jersey is spreading throughout that State. The County of Camden is putting the plans together for a countywide police department. Both Somerset County with 19 municipal police departments and Bergen County with 16, have plans in the works for consolidation in each county to four and five policing districts respectively. These

consolidation efforts will eliminate redundant layers of administrative operations and bureaucracy. According to a study conducted by Camden County New Jersey, a more efficient management structure will mean more economical and effective overall deployment of personnel; fewer chiefs, senior officers and better use of civilian professionals; consistent and efficient work rules; centralized special units, such as bomb squads, K-9 units, and detective bureaus; and streamlined operations such as payroll, information technology, human resources, finance, and purchasing and procurement. Additionally, the shared use of equipment, coordination of resources and elimination of overlapping job responsibilities will result in more funds available to allocate officers to the streets and use additional strategies to provide quality and professional police services for residents.^{xvi} In the interest of fiscal responsibility, the Governor is challenging the longstanding tradition of “home rule” wherein each municipality, not matter how small, maintained its own police department.^{xvii}

According to an article in NJ Spotlight, Somerset County taxpayers alone stand to save over \$17 million dollars a year through consolidation. “Everything is on the table”, said Bill Dressell, Executive Director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. “There has been more interest in shared services in the last few years than in the previous 35 years combined.”^{xviii} Spending caps, rising property tax appeals and a sluggish economy are forcing elected officials all over the nation to push for police department consolidation and other shared services in a movement that promises to reshape the way government services are provided.

Recommendation(s)

The secret to survival for small town policing seems to be the ability to adapt. Jurisdictions and politicians that are unable or unwilling to adapt may likely disappear. Under

what circumstances should a police executive consider shared services or consolidation?

Obviously that will vary based on circumstances. As mentioned the growing complex nature of crime and budgetary issues are significant indicators. Those cities or jurisdictions that find themselves unable to provide the level of service their community has grown accustomed to or demands may find the answer in shared services or consolidation. The restructuring of service delivery through multi-jurisdictional consolidation and shared services under Joint Powers Agreements (JPA), are some of the methods the experts have recommended for struggling police agencies to use in order to survive.

This change scenario is in place across the U.S. and particularly in New Jersey and California. Monies lost due to budget cuts and federal shortfalls will very likely not return. The future of policing will be in the strategic use of resources and a break from the tradition of business as usual. The true solution is likely a combination of all of the above approaches. Regionalization, consolidation and shared services will all play a role in the future of small town policing.

Conclusion

Finding the right fit for police services and delivery efforts needs to be well thought out and be a logical fit for the involved jurisdiction(s) while allowing all of the involved agencies to get a bite at the service delivery apple at a significantly reduced financial commitment. But no regional JPA, consolidation or contract can please everybody all of the time. Politicians and Police Chiefs will need to thoughtfully relinquish some control of their fiefdoms in the interest of survival. Fiscal responsibility, efficiency and quality service to the public are the drivers in the new normal.

At the end of the day, the “winner”, the surviving politician and police executive, will be the one that treats the safety and service to his/her community as a business - a business that provides a product. That product is a safe community. But businesses need constant evaluation, manipulation and adjustment in order to keep the product on track and the bottom line intact. In my opinion, the police executives and politicians that embrace and model decisions based on these tenants will win the day.

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