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# **Reimagining the Recruitment and Hiring of Police Officers During Tumultuous Times**

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## **Abstract**

The defund police movement has created negative consequences as it pertains to the recruitment of officers over the last five years; the author and other police administrators across the country have been presented with the challenges of hiring qualified employees from a quickly dwindling pool of applicants. This situation, now combined with the coronavirus pandemic and the Defund the Police movement, has made the job of simply filling those positions vacated by retiring officers or officers leaving the profession out of frustration almost impossible and has sent some hiring managers into a panic. Officers in some agencies are forced to take on more and more overtime to cover minimum staffing, causing problems such as understaffing and officer burnout.

This article explores what some agencies, including the author's own, have done to mitigate some of these issues. We will also examine examples of good modernization processes and tactics as they relate to police officer recruiting, such as the modernization and revamping of the application and hiring process. Recruiting also must be at the forefront of hiring managers' minds, along with the importance of portraying the correct image and brand. Once police departments have gone through these processes of change and are seeing the fruits of their labor in not just more applicants but more qualified applicants better fitting their organizations, they need to be able to retain them. This is accomplished through a robust onboarding process.

## **Introduction**

Even if you do not work in or have a direct connection to the government or the law enforcement community, you have surely noticed that the world of policing has been changing. Social and political attitudes towards policing have been shifting over the last decade, with more scrutiny, accountability, and transparency being demanded by the public. These changes in and of themselves have been mostly positive; however, during this time the anti-police movement has been gaining traction and a much louder voice.

A little over a year ago, that anti-police movement turned into the Defund the Police movement. Many involved in this movement have portrayed the law enforcement community in such a bad light as to brand it as systemically racist, violent, and overreaching. Due to the political pressure of this movement, some local governments are slicing police department budgets or putting forth plans to defund or eliminate police departments altogether.

Today that social and political climate has become so adversarial towards policing that finding quality prospective applicants for open police officer positions has become difficult at best. Add in the turmoil and economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic, and departments have even less money to entice the shrinking pool of qualified applicants. Departments must find new ways to deal with all these problems.

## **The Old Way of Recruiting**

When the author first began his Texas law enforcement career in 1993, the standard recruitment process started with a newspaper advertisement, or, in larger agencies, possibly a magazine advertisement for open positions. Potential recruits came in person to pick up an application with a list of prerequisites for the job and, if they were lucky, a job description. After the application was filled out by hand and returned, they waited for weeks for a phone call inviting them to come back in person and take a written exam. They would then sometimes wait for weeks again simply to find out if they met the minimum score required to be scheduled to return again to take a Cooper Standard Physical Agility test. This test consisted of pushups, sit-ups, and a mile-and-a-half run. If an applicant completed these in the time allotted for their age and sex, they then progressed to the interview board portion of the hiring process, which could again be weeks away. Most interview boards at the time consisted of a row of police administrators; an applicant would sit in front of them and answer a set of predetermined questions that may or may not have been job related. If an applicant passed this portion, they would be given a personal history packet to be filled out by hand and returned to a background investigator. The background checks could then take several more weeks, and if the applicant passed this portion, they would receive a phone call to schedule another face-to-face interview during which they would be given a job offer, or they would receive a letter stating that even though they had successfully passed all portions of the application process, there were so many qualified applicants that the open positions had been filled and therefore their application would simply remain on file for a specified period. The only agencies at the time that would go out and actively recruit applicants, and that had more streamlined processes, were much larger and more progressive agencies such as the Houston and Dallas Police Departments.

Even though technology has improved drastically since 1993, many agencies have not deviated that far from the process just described. The process was and is onerous, time-consuming, and a burden on not just the applicant but also on agency staff. Hiring managers often find themselves extending a job offer after this lengthy process only to find the applicant is no longer interested or has accepted another job.

## **Where There Were Many, Now There are Few**

With the last of the Baby Boomer generation retiring out of law enforcement, Gen X officers taking early retirements in record numbers, and a lack of qualified applicants, hiring managers are now in a bind. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) reported last year that 63% of departments nationwide saw a decrease in applications over the past five years. More than half of those departments described the decrease as significant. One chief, Jeri Roeder of the Lincoln, Nebraska Police Department, has noted the differences:

Fifteen years ago, the department rented hotel conference rooms to accommodate the 300 candidates who would show up to take the department's written test during one of its two annual hiring cycles . . . Now the test-takers can't even fill the department's own 75-seat classroom. During the last recruitment cycle, about 65 candidates took the test.<sup>1</sup>

A combination of factors is driving the decrease in applicants. A 12-month hiring process and a blind application process with no guarantee of a proper fit for each employee and department

certainly account for some of it. But the prospect of working for long hours for little pay in a career with increasing social stigma and the risk of ending up on the negative side of a 24-hour national news feed also contributes to the decrease.

### **Pay Alone is not Solving the Whole Problem**

Some heavily funded agencies have had a measure of success in recruitment and onboarding by offering much higher salaries than their surrounding agencies to try to pull in the best, brightest, and most experienced officers. This same recruiting tactic may also include bonuses and generous opportunities for lateral entry steps. This tactic of lateral entry benefits the hiring agency because they get trained officers who know the area, people, and processes, and who likely have worked with similar policies and procedures in the past. It can also be cost-saving in the long run compared to hiring new recruits fresh from an academy, because the department saves the time, money, and effort of putting that person through a traditional onboarding and FTO program.<sup>2</sup> The problem with this tactic is that if departments use it, they have simply moved the vacancies from one agency to another and are not injecting new recruits into the ranks.

### **Rebranding in Order to Become More Attractive to Potential Applicants**

For smaller, less well-funded agencies, which would include the author's agency of fewer than thirty sworn officers, pulling in applicants with pay alone is not an option. The Dayton Police Department and others its size must reimagine and rebrand not only their recruitment and retention tactics, but sometimes their entire departments. Agencies must find a way to make people want to work for them for something other than just a paycheck.

To accomplish this goal, agencies need to ask themselves the following questions:

- Do the Police Department building, equipment and uniforms look modern and attractive?
- Does the Police Department still have outdated policies and procedures that leave it vulnerable to litigation due to inadequacies or other liabilities?
- Does the Police Department still have outdated hiring standards that preclude quality candidates because of the fact that they have facial hair or tattoos, or the fact that they tried Marijuana in high school?
- Does the Police Department have a strong positive online and social media presence?
- Does the Police Department demonstrate transparency by communicating its principles, values, and expectations?
- Does the Police Department demonstrate inclusion and diversity within its ranks?
- Does The Police Department have open door policies when it comes to our officers' concerns and suggestions?

The author's own department is blessed with having a very supportive council and citizenry. The Dayton Police Department started the process of building trust in the community by building a new public safety complex through the use of a bond. The old department building was a repurposed city hall facility from the 1940s; it was overcrowded and not something that current employees—much less potential recruits—could look at with pride. The department then had a change in administration that brought in modernization along with higher expectations and professionalism. The new administration conducted a department-wide evaluation that involved

interviewing every employee through facilitators to determine strengths, weaknesses, and needs. This process was so successful that it was carried out across the entire city government organization. Titled Project Listen, it was later featured by Texas Town & City Magazine.<sup>3</sup> Through this process, the Dayton Police Department was able to address inadequacies in training, equipment, software, personnel, and recruiting and retention. Because of this, the department changed its patch, logo, uniforms, badges, and vehicles to a more modern look, and adopted a set of principles known as S.H.I.N.E.:

**Service** – We act in service to our constituents and each other. We build and lift up. We do not tear down.

**Humility** – We have been given great responsibilities for the citizens of Dayton and strive for efficient and effective service to them.

**Integrity** – Transparency, honesty, open lines of communication, and a willingness to accept fault, all help to build trust in our community members and team members.

**Nobility** – Public service is a badge of honor. We are held to a higher standard because we have been granted the public’s trust.

**Excellence** – We get the job done right. We take pride in being results-driven and customer oriented. Our central goals are to take care of others and to raise quality of life every day.

Everything the author’s department does is based on these simple principles. The department also went through the process of becoming a Recognized Agency through the Texas Police Chiefs Association.<sup>4</sup>

This success all goes into selling an image to not just Dayton citizens but to would-be applicants. The above details are just examples of what one agency is going through to become more marketable to applicants; they may not work for everyone, but these tactics have been successful for the City of Dayton Police Department.

### **Recruiting and Hiring Processes: Lighter, Stronger, Faster, More Efficient**

To streamline the recruitment and hiring process, departments can take the Lean Six Sigma<sup>5</sup> approach and map out their processes, making them as efficient as possible without compromising the integrity of each process. Centralized recruiting and hiring with a trained, dedicated team of officers, the stakeholders, will allow perspective applicants to know who they will work with if hired. With technology, agencies can streamline several processes. For example, if an applicant lives hours or days away, documents can be signed and sent electronically. Some of the supporting documentation for an applicant’s background investigation, such as transcripts and tax records, can be requested and delivered electronically. The pandemic has taught us that interviews and meetings that used to take place face-to-face can now take place through applications such as ZOOM and Go to Meetings. With these applications, people may not be able to receive a personal handshake, but they can still observe facial expressions and body language, which are important communication signals that people must see each other to obtain. The goal for the Dayton Police Department is to make the recruitment and hiring process as simple and expedient as possible while still using due diligence in vetting the applicants. Instigating similar processes will allow other agencies to cut down on wasted time—both their own and their applicants’.

## Go Where the Applicants Are

Using our old method of recruiting and hiring, the recruiters of the Dayton Police Department made the applicants come to them. What recruiters should be doing instead is actively seeking out potential applicants. The author's suggestion to departments is to have a dedicated team that visits local colleges and develops relationships with advisors, not just in the Criminal Justice department but also in the Business, Psychology, and Humanities departments, and in any other program that the college offers that can be applicable to law enforcement work. Arrange to set up recruiting tables on campus and have them staffed by the department's rank and file officers so that the prospective applicants are speaking to the people that they would be working with, not just those that they would be working for.

Local law enforcement academies that are open to general enrolment are a natural recruiting ground, but when the author first started contacting the academy coordinators, he was surprised to learn that most of the local law enforcement agencies were not already doing the same. The first time the Dayton Police Department set up a recruitment table at a local academy, officers were able to recruit two cadets that had already applied elsewhere and received job offers, one of which was with an even higher paying agency. That was over two years ago, and both of those cadets have turned into excellent officers who assist with the department's recruiting today.

Another suggestion is to learn from the US military's recruiting tactics and have a recruiting team start spending time at local high schools. Even though the students have not reached the age required by most departments for employment, they are close, and it may help develop an interest in law enforcement and garner future applicants.

The best recruiting tool is sitting on almost every desk in every police department in the nation. It is a computer with an internet connection. When recruiters discuss going where the applicants are, they must keep in mind that most are online and can be reached through traditional web pages and message boards such as Indeed, Monster, and Glassdoor, to name a few, and perhaps even more effectively through social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Departments should make sure they have a strong web and social media presence and should designate someone from the recruitment team to administer the online accounts.

The main goals of a department's recruiting team should be to seek out applicants wherever they are located and to educate them regarding what the department has to offer. While doing so, the department needs to be recruiting only those applicants that share in the department's ideals, vision, principles, and sense of community. Experience and education should be relevant only if the person shares in those ideals.<sup>6</sup> Kevin Morison puts it this way in his overview of law enforcement hiring strategies, a publication sponsored by Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and the U.S. Department of Justice:

About three or four years ago, we started to look at our hiring process in terms of our outcomes. We're trying to find the right individuals who we can train to be the kind of officers we want. We can give them training, but if they are not coming in with those human qualities that you want, we can't train those. So we say "Hire the heart, train the brain."<sup>7</sup>

## Onboarding: It Leaves an Impression

Once a department hires those prized applicants, it needs to be able to retain them. After speaking to officers in exit interviews and officers in employment interviews about why they left their last agency so quickly, the author found that dissatisfaction with the onboarding process was a common theme. The officers interviewed indicated that the processes they had experienced were unorganized, unprofessional, and unjustified: often, one department did not know what the other was doing or supposed to do.

Hiring an onboarding manager who can coordinate and schedule the process will solve these problems. Departments must respect all of the hard work already expended by the recruiting and hiring team, not to mention the applicants. They did a lot to get to this point, and should not be discarded once they get in the door. If the process is unorganized and unprofessional, they will begin to second-guess their decision come to a particular agency in the first place. No matter how good a department's patrol division or its FTO program are, the new employees' first and lasting impression of their new jobs that they have worked so hard for will be a department's onboarding process.

Departments need to make sure the process is streamlined, and that their new employees are assigned an onboarding buddy: someone who is familiar with the process and can walk them through HR paperwork and coach them through health and disability insurance registration forms. New hires also need to be taught how to use the phone system, how to set up their department e-mail, where city offices and services are located, etc. If they are moving to the area, departments should provide a list of apartment complexes and realtors to go through in order to secure housing. New hires also need maps or information on the location of shopping centers, medical facilities, schools, and childcare facilities.<sup>8</sup> When a new employee shows up to meet their FTO, the only thing they need to be concerned about is learning their new job.

## Conclusion

With changes to the recruitment and hiring processes still ongoing, a clear analysis of how these changes will affect recruitment and retention in the future has not yet emerged. As for the author's department, it is receiving more qualified applicants than before it implemented these changes. The department is also able to fill vacancies with new or experienced officers that share the department's principles, values, and culture. Therefore, the author would suggest the Dayton Police Department's strategies to any department seeking to reinvigorate their own recruitment and hiring system.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Salter, "People don't want to be cops' – During a charged time, law enforcement struggles to diversify staff," *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 12, 2020, [https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/people-dont-want-to-be-cops-during-a-charged-time-law-enforcement-struggles-to-diversify/article\\_11e02d18-43ae-57db-9b81-89abb0254622.html](https://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/people-dont-want-to-be-cops-during-a-charged-time-law-enforcement-struggles-to-diversify/article_11e02d18-43ae-57db-9b81-89abb0254622.html).

<sup>2</sup> Mike Maciag, "With Fewer Police Applicants, Departments Engage in Bidding Wars: Hiring police officers is much harder than it used to be. To stay competitive, some are offering generous

pay increases and bonuses,” *Governing*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-hiring-police-officers.html>. Accessed April 10, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> City of Dayton, “Project Listen,” *Texas Town & City*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.tml.org/DocumentCenter/View/2345/122020TTC>.

<sup>4</sup> “TPCAF Recognition Program: Getting Started,” Texas Police Chiefs Association, 2011, <https://www.texaspolicechiefs.org/recognition-program>.

<sup>5</sup> “What Is Six Sigma?” American Society for Quality, <https://asq.org/quality-resources/six-sigma>.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin P. Morison, *Hiring for the 21st Century Law Enforcement Officer: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Success* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2017), 15-37, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-w0831-pub.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Cordivano, “Understanding and Designing an Inclusive Onboarding Experience,” *Medium*, December 17, 2019, <https://medium.com/sarah-cordivano/understanding-and-designing-an-inclusive-onboarding-experience-4be6b5f7c669>.