Staffing Police Agencies
By Chief Marlin Price, Retired

This is the first of a three-part series on police staffing. This article discusses the staffing of patrol operations. Part two will discuss CID staffing, and part three will discuss staffing of other police activities and some tips on discussing these issues with your city manager or mayor.

Occasionally, Mayors, City Managers, or Police Chiefs contact TPCA for a comprehensive analysis of their Police Department's staffing. TPCA offers this service at a significantly lower cost than most consulting firms, making it an affordable and valuable resource for your department. The reviews are conducted by a team of retired chiefs, each with extensive experience in these studies, ensuring the highest quality of service. After the expenses are paid, the fees charged to cities are deposited into the Foundation's Officer Death Benefit fund, a testament to TPCA's commitment to the law enforcement community.

Historically, the IACP recommended the 1/3 time on call, 1/3 administrative time, and 1/3 uncommitted or officer-initiated time as the standard for staffing. Then, it moved to an officers-per-thousand population model. Because of several problems with these models, these methods have now fallen away. Today, the IACP and the International City Managers Association (ICMA) have embraced a more effective "workload" model. This model, which the TPCA uses, is designed to accurately determine the number of officers needed for department patrol operations and scheduling based on the actual workload officers face.

A police officer's time can be separated into administrative time (the time they are off work on days off, holidays, vacations, sick, or at training), call servicing time (time required to answer calls coming from the citizens of the community), and the remaining uncommitted time (the time officers can use for self-initiated activity such as traffic stops, and crime reductions activities). The workload model used today requires a detailed analysis of Computer Aided Dispatch data to determine the number of Citizen Generated calls for service and the average time on calls, as well as an analysis of the department's payroll to determine the average hours officers are off work. Even when officers are at work, officers have additional administrative time, such as meals, briefings, breaks, and vehicle maintenance, reducing the time available to do police work.

Using this data, we can accurately determine the current percent of uncommitted time you have, given the number of calls and the number of officers assigned to call-answering duties. It also allows us to compute the number of officers needed to attain a specific uncommitted time percentage. Why is the percent uncommitted time important? Because we know, from both our own staffing studies and department audits and those of other consulting firms, what officers can do with varying amounts of uncommitted time.

Over the past three decades, research in policing has identified some straightforward strategies for reducing crime in a community. These strategies include hot-spot policing, focused deterrence, and Problem-Oriented Policing. However, implementing and maintaining these initiatives requires time and effort.

Police activity is either citizen-generated, such as 911 calls requesting service, or officer-generated, such as observing suspicious or criminal activity while on patrol or stopping traffic violators. Officer-generated activity is conducted during "uncommitted time" in between citizens' calls for service. Crime reduction strategies, such as hot-spot policing, focused deterrence, or Problem-Oriented Policing, are also accomplished during this uncommitted time. As cities grow, the number of calls for service usually increases, which reduces the total uncommitted time because the time on call increases. Or, if you lose patrol officers, this will also result in less uncommitted time. In these scenarios, a police department becomes increasingly reactive to crime instead of being able to actively intercept or prevent criminal activity. Officers running from one call to another rarely have time to work on problem areas or stop suspicious vehicles. As more calls are received, the response time can increase if additional staff is not provided.

Experience with staffing analyses conducted by the TPCA and other private industry consulting firms has identified levels of uncommitted time needed for various police activity levels.

If an agency has 40-50 percent of an officer's work day as uncommitted time, the officer can conduct numerous crime prevention activities, such as spending time in crime hot spot locations, conducting surveillance and tracking of known offenders and sexual predators, identifying specific crime problems, and applying custom-designed strategies to eliminate them. They also have time to conduct traffic stops, assist citizens with neighborhood problems, and investigate suspicious circumstances. Agencies with over 50 percent uncommitted time can even have additional community programs such as GREAT (Gang Resistance Education and Training), after-school and athletic programs for kids, and community service programs, all as part of their workday without sacrificing their crime reduction or call-answering responsibilities.

If uncommitted time is between 30 and 40 percent, the officers have sufficient time to answer citizen calls, make sufficient traffic and investigative stops to ensure safe traffic movement and conduct some crime reduction activities like hot spot policing or focused deterrence. Thirty percent is believed to be the lowest level for providing essential police services such as answering calls, making arrests, and writing tickets. It is widely regarded as not sufficient for any significant crime reduction operations.

Several very undesirable things begin to happen as a department approaches 20 percent uncommitted time. Because officers know they are likely to get another call soon, they tend to spend less time on calls with the citizens. For the citizen, this creates a negative impression about the police when they hurry through calls, giving the citizen the impression that they don't care. Other adverse effects are:

- An increase in overtime as officers wait until the end of their shift to write reports.

- Officers work extra shifts to maintain required staffing, which leads to fewer days off, less rest and family time, and more sick time. Officers come to departments with the promise of more family time but are disappointed in the number of extra shifts they must work due to low staffing. This often leads to their leaving the department.

- A decrease in training time because officers cannot be spared off shift to obtain training.

- Fewer traffic stops due to less uncommitted time, resulting in fewer citations and less impact on traffic accident reduction.

- Officers may begin the dangerous practice of answering two-officer calls alone (particularly for calls where the danger to officers is greater and necessitates sending two officers, like family disturbances).

Police can reduce crime in a community. Even with a low percentage of uncommitted time, agencies can have an effect if they are properly directed and led. First-line supervisors are the key. They must understand the crime reduction strategies and prioritize those activities during the workday. They also need to evaluate officers based on their ability to perform these activities. Just answering calls, making arrests, and writing citations doesn't reduce crime.

The TPCA is committed to assisting Texas agencies in determining their best staffing levels. If you want to talk with one of our retired chiefs doing these analyses, contact Executive Director Gene Ellis.

Chief Marlin Price is a retired Chief of Police and the former Director of the Texas Accreditation Program. He is a TPCA instructor in several training programs and has authored two books, "Effective and Accountable Policing" and "Police Department Auditing," both available on Amazon. Profits from the sale of these books go to the TPCA Foundation's Officer Death Benefit Fund.