



Public Safety Education & Training Center



Growing Apprenticeships and Public Safety Workforce (GAPS) Act Workgroup

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Acknowledgements

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Roster of Members

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Executive Summary

Senate Bill 470 established a working group to research and report on methods and strategies to improve the retention and recruitment within law enforcement agencies and correctional facilities. The workgroup was established and staffed by the Maryland Police Training & Standards Commission.

Individual surveys were developed to identify retention and recruitment efforts in the law enforcement and correctional community. In addition to these surveys, Department of Justice reports focusing on nationwide recruitment and retention concerns were analyzed for relevancy and the subject matter expertise of the Workgroup have been incorporated into this report.



Retention

Law Enforcement Retention in the State of Maryland

Based on survey results, law enforcement operates on average at 83% of its authorized strength. This average was consistent throughout the state regardless of size although some agencies were at full strength and others were as low as 63%. Correctional facilities were working on average at 81% of their authorized strength.

Various challenges were identified as affecting a law enforcement agency's ability to retain officers. The primary challenges identified were retirement plans and salary. Participation in the State of Maryland's Law Enforcement Officers Pension System (LEOPS) is voluntary and agencies opt not to participate for financial reasons. Agencies that do participate advise that a police officer would have to work 32.5 years to receive the highest percentage (65%) as officers receive 2% of their salary for each year served. Larger agencies traditionally provide more lucrative retirements. Some agencies identified that officers select to leave their vocation earlier than expected to start a second career with better benefits. Salary concerns were more challenging for smaller agencies that often lose qualified officers to larger agencies with higher salaries. The impact of police reform and a perceived negative portrayal of police officers was also a challenge to retention though not as significant as retirement and salary.

Law enforcement agencies have identified numerous successful strategies to retain police officers. Some agencies are offering additional pay for specialty units or attempting to offer improved salary compensation. Workforce improvements including leave flexibility, better shift assignments, and take-home vehicle programs have seen some success. Other agencies have focused on quality-of-life improvements such as tuition assistance, fitness incentives, gym memberships, and/or better equipment and uniforms. Many agencies expressed a willingness to expand or adopt similar programs but are hampered by budgetary restrictions.

The impact of retention bonuses was inconclusive. Some agencies considered bonuses to be a successful strategy while others found them ineffective or a short-term solution.

Correctional Facility Retention in the State of Maryland

Survey results indicated that correctional facilities are operating at 84% of authorized actual strength. The average was broader than that found in law enforcement with some facilities working at 98% and others as low as 49%.

Correctional facilities identified mandatory overtime as one of the primary factors affecting officer retention. This in turn leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy as retention numbers decline. Salary considerations were identified as a consideration for many agencies while some also indicated that correctional officers leave/transfer to police positions. Transferring to police positions was more prevalent in sheriff departments that oversee detention centers and law enforcement patrols.

Retention strategies have been less successful at correctional facilities with many survey respondents unable to identify successful strategies. Retention bonuses have been offered by some facilities but are often limited to senior employees or individuals of certain ranks. Other departments would like to adopt retention bonuses but have failed to do so for fiscal reasons. Quality of life improvements including employee appreciation days and free meals have had a positive impact. The most consistently identified strategy is to hire more officers to minimize mandatory overtime and officer burnout.



Recruitment

Law Enforcement Recruitment in the State of Maryland

Based on survey results, 78% of responding agencies acknowledged the difficulty in recruiting and hiring qualified applicants. Agencies having recruiting difficulties identified applications received over the past 5 years have decreased between 50 and 70 percent. The primary challenge affecting recruitment is a negative perception of law enforcement by the media. Smaller agencies identified additional challenges related to less competitive salaries, a lack of specialty units, and/or growth opportunities.

Having a smaller pool of applicants has led to additional challenges. Agencies identified an average applicant processing time of 4-6 months to hire recruits. The extensive background vetting that must be performed before an individual can be certified as a police officer causes this. During the vetting process, applicants are disqualified for a variety of reasons with the prevalent being non-cannabis drug usage, disqualifying criminal activity, and/or failing the medical examination or psychological examination. Other candidates self-select themselves out of the process or find employment that is more lucrative in the private sector while processing.

After being hired, applicants must attend a comprehensive six-month entry-level program that includes a combination of written examinations, skill proficiency testing, and situational-based learning exercises that must all be mastered before graduation. After completion of the entry-level program, the recruit must complete a Field Training program that is a minimum of six weeks. If the individual is successful, a department is facing over a year before a potential applicant is fully certified and able to perform the functions of a police officer. To shorten this timeframe, some agencies have streamlined or automated their hiring process.

Successful recruitment strategies include increasing salaries and benefits to make positions more competitive. Other agencies are offering sign-on bonuses to compete with more lucrative agencies. Agencies have increased their recruitment activities by directing additional resources, maintaining a year-round recruitment presence, and/or expanding the recruitment area. Agencies have implemented additional strategies to improve or maintain diversity. These include but are not limited to selected recruitment in diverse communities, working with community organizations, and focusing on partnerships with HBCUs. Agencies identified multiple strategies they would like to adopt but are limited due to fiscal restraints. These included a full-time recruitment section, media advertising, additional hiring incentives, and improved data systems to track potential applicants.

Correctional Facility Recruitment in the State of Maryland

Survey responses were less complete regarding correctional recruitment. Seventy-five percent of the responding agencies identified difficulty recruiting and hiring qualified applicants. Facilities having recruiting difficulties identified applications received over the past 5 years have decreased between 30 and 50 percent. The primary recruitment challenge identified was salary competitiveness when compared to law enforcement agencies and the private workforce. Facilities identified an average processing time of up to three months from application to the hiring of officers. The primary challenge identified is the disqualification of applicants for a variety of reasons with the prevalent drug usage, disqualifying criminal activity, and/or failing the psychological examination.

Successful strategies include retention bonuses and the elimination of physical fitness testing. Some facilities have identified success by expanding online recruitment and an increased social media presence. Strategies to improve diversity include targeted recruiting, and using diversity workgroups.



Conclusion

While retention is a concern within the law enforcement community, this could be negated with an improvement in the LEOPS retirement system. This would encourage officers to stay within the vocation longer instead of moving on in an attempt to start a second career. This would alleviate the retention concern and allow law enforcement agencies to better project annual authorized strength requirements.

Law enforcement recruitment is the primary area of concern identified. The pool of qualified applicants must be significantly increased to improve recruitment outcomes. Developing forward facing recruitment programs in the community while increasing a positive social media presence has shown benefits. Improving compensation packages that are more competitive with the private sector has been successful but places a monetary burden on local departments.

Correctional facilities primary area of concern is in the retention of officers. The significant shortage of officers and the mandatory overtime requirements leads directly to burnout and resignations. Expanding the use of retention bonuses and considering rehiring retired annuitants could alleviate mandatory overtime.

Improvement in retention would decrease the stress placed on correctional recruitment thus allowing recruitment to be more successful. The incorporation of competitive compensation packages combined with the use of retention bonuses could improve recruitment. The use of technology that highlights the diverse roles and responsibilities found at correctional facilities could improve the public perception of correctional careers.

Summary

Law enforcement agencies and correctional facilities both face challenges in recruitment and retention. However, the causation of these challenges and the potential pathways to improvement are very different based on the results of the surveys.

Law enforcement should take steps to improve their retirement system while focusing on increasing the recruitment pool of qualified applicants using social media and attractive compensation packages. Correctional facilities should focus on retaining employees, which would reduce the pressure placed on recruitment. This would allow recruitment to emphasize quality over quantity when considering potential applicants.