

Bridging the Gap
*Educating Communities on the Realities of
Law Enforcement through a Citizen Police Academy*

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Introduction

“Why couldn’t that cop just shoot him in the leg?”

“Don’t you have anything better to do, like catch real bad guys?”

“There’s never a cop around when you need one!”

These are a few things many police officers have heard at one time or another, and they reflect the attitude many members of the communities we serve have toward their police officers. Unfortunately, people develop their perception of the police and how we should or should not do our jobs, based on what they see on television or in movies and what they see on the news as well as their own personal experiences with officers (which rarely happen when a person is experiencing something positive). Hollywood teaches people, among other things, that cops should be able to shoot with sniper like accuracy in any situation. The news teaches people that officers are corrupt at worst and inept at best by often airing or printing any negative story they can find or by spinning stories that are not inherently negative to sensationalize them. We as police officers do ourselves no favors by often forgetting that the vast majority of the public we contact is made up of good people that are just having a bad day.

These negative opinions people develop of police officers serve to do nothing more than damage our relationship with them which in turn causes a number of problems. As a criminal investigator, bad community relations affect my ability to gather information needed for an investigation. Misinformed or uneducated citizens do not understand vital aspects of policing and the criminal justice system, but they vote on issues that directly affect us and our ability to do our jobs. These same people make up our jury pools in criminal and civil trials and could potentially judge us as police officers for our actions in the line of duty.

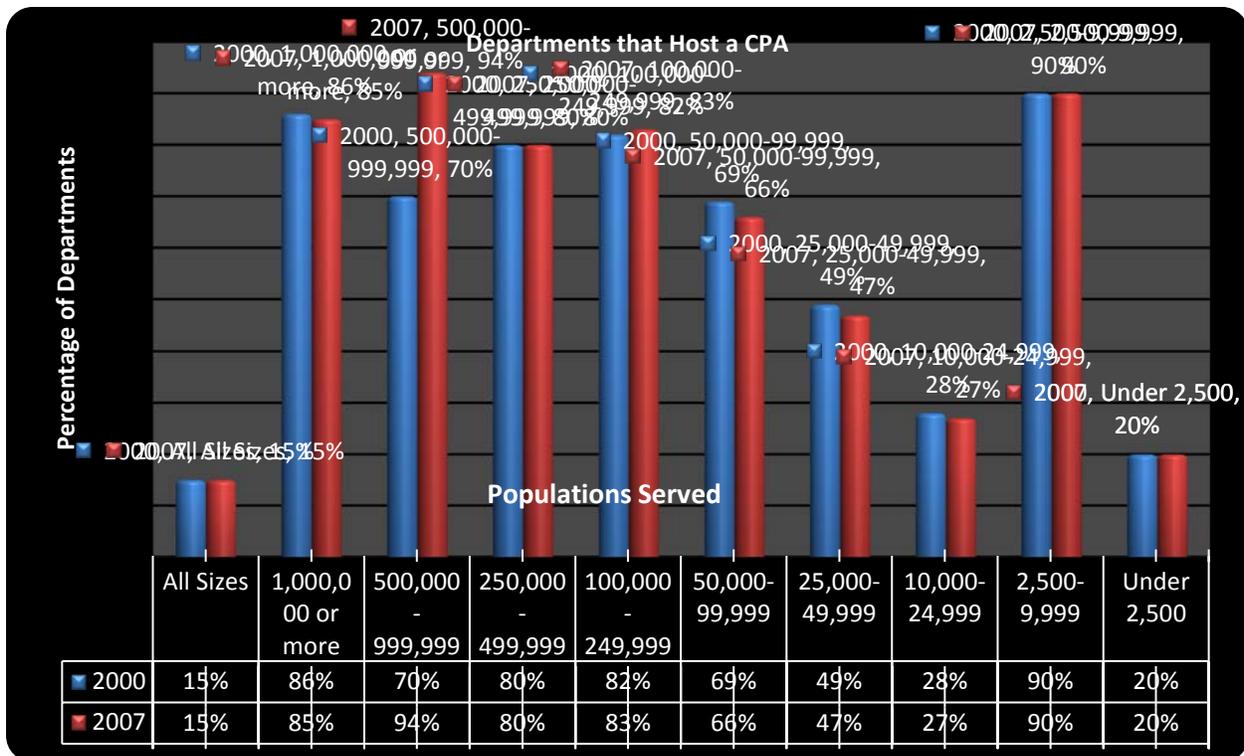
As police officers it is our duty to protect and serve. We understand that well and we know what it entails. However, we drop the ball when we fail to educate and inform the very people that we work for about how we carry out our job duties and allow unqualified people to do that for us. When that happens the public has expectations of the police that are sometimes unrealistic which is the fault of no one other than the police themselves. When we say we protect and serve, part of that service should be educating the public as to what we do and why we do it.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a popular program, known as Citizen Police Academy (CPA), which is employed by many departments to “help create more informed citizens, debunk myths about law enforcement, and open the lines of communication between civilians and officers” (Ross, 2013). This paper is also aimed at laying the groundwork for developing such a program at a department that does not already have one.

Citizen Police Academy’s History

To understand the value of conducting a Citizen Police Academy, it is important to be aware of the history of CPA and how it has become common place in many departments in the United States. The CPA was first developed in Exeter, England in 1977 as a “Police Night School” that was used to teach the citizens about the function and organization of their police system (NCPAA, 2012). Several years later CPA made its way to the United States with the first known CPA being held in Orlando, Florida in 1985. Their purpose in hosting a CPA was to reduce crime by forging a stronger citizen bond with the police department (NCPAA, 2012).

Since the first United States CPA in 1985, the program has become very popular. The U.S. Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) publishes reports every few years as part of their *Local Police Departments* series. In 2000, BJS reported that 15% of all departments surveyed conducted a Citizen Police Academy (Hickman & Reaves, 2003). In 2007 that number had not changed (Reaves, 2010). While that percentage may seem small, the departments that reported hosting a CPA employed 57% of all officers in 2000 and 60% of all officers in 2007(Hickman & Reaves, 2003)(Reaves, 2010). As one would guess, the departments that employ more officers (meaning they serve larger populations) made up the bulk of the departments that host a CPA. Below is a chart derived from the reports from BJS representing the distribution of CPAs in the United States. There are no numbers reported in the years prior to 2000 by BJS regarding the employment of CPAs in the US.



(Hickman & Reaves, 2003)(Reaves, 2010)

Even in Arkansas, Citizen Police Academies are utilized all over the state. I did a google search of “arkansas citizen police academy” and found 22 different departments in our state that currently, or in the recent past, have CPAs within the first five pages of search results. While this is not a scientific way of determining how many CPAs are held in Arkansas, it does provide an idea of the use of this program in Arkansas.

Success of the Citizen Police Academy

The Citizen Police Academy is not the ultimate answer to every problem in law enforcement. Nevertheless, CPA does open an avenue for officers and civilians to have a dialogue with one another thereby dispelling some animosity or misgivings one group may have toward the other. This is a large problem in policing because we need the support of our communities if we are going to succeed at our jobs. In my exploration of this topic, I have found the vast majority of reactions to the CPA from police and citizens alike have been overwhelmingly positive.

In doing research for this paper, I reached out to three different Arkansas police departments that currently host a CPA with a questionnaire. The departments I contacted were

Fort Smith Police Department, North Little Rock Police Department and Hot Springs Police Department. I sent the questionnaire to the CPA coordinators of each of those agencies and one of the questions I asked was “What benefits, if any, to the department and/or community have noticed or been made aware of because of CPA?”. This question seems to me to be the greatest tool in measuring if a CPA is successful. If there are no benefits to the program, there is no reason to host it. Cpl. Sonia Luzader of the Hot Springs PD gave me the following answer: “A huge awakening of the citizen’s part to understand what we do and the why it takes time to solve community issues. In turn, it reminds us that many average tax payers have questions they do not know answers to that we take for granted as common knowledge. It keeps us on our toes. More importantly, it shows we are no different than them and need their support on all levels and we truly care about our community. We explain officer discretion and officer safety to the fullest.” (Luzader, 2014). I received the next answer from Sgt. Brian Dedrick of the North Little Rock PD: “We receive numerous compliments in reference to hosting the CPA. The public loves to participate and usually take a lot of good information away from the program that they just did not know about the police department and what officers do on a daily basis. It also build a rapport with the community and citizens seem to understand why we do the things we do. For instance traffic stops, why we might have them stay in the car, or why we might have them step out of the car. Why we separate witnesses at crime scenes, etc.” (Dedrick, 2014).

Based on those answers, I would conclude that the CPA programs at those departments have been successful for the department. Clearly we can’t reach everyone with a program like CPA, but the hope is the students that attend will tell their friends, families, and neighbors about their experiences within the CPA, and in so doing will become educators themselves.

The attendees also determine if a CPA is accomplishing goals for the program. The police department in Lakewood, Colorado has hosted a CPA since 1990. In an article that was written after that first class one of the students said of the academy, “It was excellent and I think everyone in the academy feels the same way. I have a sincere appreciation for the stresses of police agents, their jobs, and the dedication of their efforts to protect us. I really respect the department.” (Kubeck, 1990). That is what all law enforcement officers want to hear. Few of us do the job for praise or to be put on a pedestal but it is satisfying to know that we have the respect and thanks of those we serve in such a difficult job. It should be no surprise that putting someone in our shoes to help them understand what we deal with on a daily basis is a most

efficient way of gaining their respect. When that is earned from a citizen it speaks to the success of the CPA program they attended.

Student Selection

If a CPA is as successful as the ones described above, it would be ideal to send every citizen through the training that had an interest in it. However, class sizes must be limited to “ensure high officer interaction and quality hands-on experience”.(Ross, 2013) Depending on the curriculum offered, students may be given the opportunity to ride along with officers, go through firearms or simunition training or other types of hands-on instruction. With a smaller class size, students should be able to delve deeper into the training than with larger class sizes. Hot Springs Police limit their class sizes to 20 students (Luzader, 2014) and NLR PD limits their classes to around 15 students (Dedrick, 2014). Those numbers are similar to what I discovered at other departments that offer a CPA.

With limited numbers such as those, demand would likely outweigh a department’s ability to accommodate all who want to attend. Therefore, most departments establish a set of qualifications for selection. For departments that are just beginning a CPA program the department should consider hand selecting the students rather than going through an application process, at least for the first session. The reason for this is two-fold: First, in a jurisdiction where the community has never been exposed to a Citizen Police Academy, applications may be sparse because people may not know what it is. Second, hand picking students would give the department an opportunity to invite people that can be counted on to spread the word about what CPA is and raise interest in the program. Those who should be considered as students are community leaders, media personnel, activists, school employees, business leaders, clergy, and essentially anyone that has a wide sphere of influence. (Brantner-Smith, 2014)

Once the program has been established and there is noticeable interest in the CPA, most departments use an application process to fill the class with students. Agencies usually have set criteria that students must meet to weed through the applications. The general qualifications are a minimum age for applicants with no or very limited criminal history. Many departments conduct limited background checks on applicants to be sure they meet the requirements (Brantner-Smith, 2014). Fort Smith PD allows anyone that applies for CPA to be accepted as long as they have no felony convictions or convictions for theft, drugs or domestic violence. They are also required to have a valid driver’s license and must be at least 18 years of age.

(Milam, 2014) Hot Springs PD has similar requirements but have an added condition that students must live or work in Garland County (City of Hot Springs, 2014). Avon, Indiana police department includes essay questions in their application. According to Sgt. Jeff Lewis of Avon PD, “It helps us weed out folks applying for the wrong reasons and focus on the students that generally want to learn how we do what we do.” (Ross, 2013).

Student selection is probably one of the most vital aspects to a department’s Citizen Police Academy. As mentioned above, the hope is that citizens that have attended CPA will go back out into their communities and pass along what they learned. If the people who are chosen, at least initially, are somewhat influential among their peers and they have a positive experience with CPA, that is a major step toward reaching the goal of creating an informed citizenry and creating alliances within the community that can benefit both the police department and the people we serve.

Curriculum

Obviously, another factor that will determine the effectiveness of the Citizen Police Academy is what topics are covered and how they are taught. Law enforcement has many facets which are of interest to people that are not in that field. Most departments try to cover all of the services they offer, but do not go into ones for which they are not equipped and manned. For example, the Jonesboro Police Department does not have an aviation unit so it would make no sense to spend time in class covering that subject just for the fun of it. Looking at what a department can offer in their CPA based on what services they offer is a good way to narrow the program of study.

Most departments are also careful to not spend too much time on any one subject. Some topics may need more than one class period to cover, mainly if they are of a complicated nature or require lots of hands-on, practical based training. The purpose of the academy, however, is to introduce a variety of subjects in order to give students as complete a look at the law enforcement field as possible (Ross, 2013). In addition, variety keeps the course interesting and participants hopefully remain engaged in the process. How many topics can be covered depends on how long a department’s CPA is. I have found some to be as short as five weeks but most are 10 to 12 weeks long. Each class is held on a weeknight for, on average, three hours.

There are some subjects in law enforcement that are universal to almost every department in existence. These would include, but are not limited to, search and seizure, patrol operations, criminal investigations, police department organization, officer safety and use of force/use of deadly force. Those are all very important for participants to cover because they are at the core of policing in the United States. Teaching these subjects would give the students an inside, in-depth look at the most vital aspects of law enforcement operations.

Other things that departments cover are report writing, jail operations, K-9 demonstrations, dispatch and telecommunications, SWAT, Drug Task Force, training, internal affairs, traffic enforcement, emergency vehicle operations and numerous other topics. Below is the class schedule from the most recent class at Hot Springs PD:

Hot Springs PD Fall 2014 CPA Class Schedule

Date	Topic(s)
September 4:	Introductions
September 11:	Hiring, Recruiting
	Training, Internal Affairs
September 18:	Field Operations/Special Operations
	911 & Dispatch Operations
September 25:	Housing
	School Resource Officers
	Downtown Bicycle Patrol
October 2:	CID Overview
	Search & Seizure
October 9:	Sex Crimes Investigations
	Crime Scene
October 16:	Drug Task Force
	Street Crimes
October 23:	Firearms Simulator*^ (Location: NPCC)
October 30:	S.W.A.T*^ (Location: TBA)
November 6:	Motorcycle Demo*^ (Location: TBA)
	K-9 Demo*^ (Location: TBA)
November 13:	Crime Analysis
	Becoming a Better Witness
November 20:	Thin Blue Line
	Graduation

(City of Hot Springs, 2014)

Part of the formula for an engaging CPA is how to teach the topics. PowerPoint is a great tool for presentations but some things in law enforcement will best be taught by demonstration or actual class participation. I can tell someone how harrowing it is going into a building, not knowing what is on the other side of the door, but that is not nearly as effective as them experiencing as close to the real thing as we can get with some hands-on scenarios. I can

talk about what a police dog can do but it would be so much more engaging for the student to actually see it first-hand.

A few other techniques utilized by departments to get their students out of the classroom are simunition or firearms simulator training, actual firearms training on the range, mock crime scene processing, traffic stop scenarios, skid car training, ride-alongs or dash cam/training videos. Some of these practical exercises may not be able to be completed within the three hour window provided during the normal class schedule. Because of that, some departments provide opportunities for those activities by making them elective courses that can be taken at the discretion of the participants on a day other than the normal class day. While the purpose of CPA is not to create police officers, giving students a first-hand feel for what we do as law enforcement officers will reinforce the difficulties that we face day in and day out and hopefully give them an appreciation for that reality.

Once students complete the CPA, most departments have a graduation ceremony for the participants to honor their willingness to learn and recognize them for the sacrifice they made to attend the course in order to educate themselves and others around them. Evanston, Illinois Police Department has a twelve week academy that is capped off in the twelfth week with a seemingly involved graduation ceremony. This is how they advertise it on their website:

Week 12
Objective: To recognize the students for their participation in the Academy.
Welcome and Opening Remarks
Chief of Police Remarks
Keynote Speaker
Class Representative Speaker
Presentation of Certificates, Class Photo, distribution of Jackets
Refreshments
(City of Evanston, 2014)

Usually at the beginning of something such as a CPA, most people are motivated and excited about being involved. But, once the new wears off, some students may need an incentive to stay the course. These participants are receiving no compensation for being involved with the CPA, so a graduation ceremony, like the one shown above, may be a good way to go to motivate them to finish the course. Most departments require students to miss no more than two to three classes to be eligible for graduation. That might provide that impetus to keep the students engaged.

Another inducement for students to complete the course that some departments use is allowing them volunteer opportunities once they have graduated the course. Lakewood, CO is one such department and makes graduating the CPA a requirement to qualify for most volunteer opportunities (Lakewood, Colorado, 2012). Fort Smith PD also allows graduates to volunteer to assist the department. According to Cpl. Milam, they have a CPA Alumni Association and members assist with future Citizen Police Academies (Milam, 2014). In order to reinforce the knowledge and goodwill gained throughout a CPA, agencies should allow for follow-up activities. This will also hold citizen interest long after the conclusion of an academy (Greenberg, 1991).

Conclusion

Ret. Lt. Jim Glennon, in an article he authored for Law Officer Magazine, wrote the following:

“In the 1960’s, it was a disparaging and all-too-familiar moniker; police officers around the country heard it directed at them on a daily basis. “Pigs!” It continued through much of the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s, but as long hair shortened, bell-bottoms narrowed and body piercings and tattoos replaced love-beads and Fu Manchus, the term and perspective began to fade... I believe there are many reasons for this... Cops were doing better jobs and putting in a collective effort to reconnect with the citizens they were paid to protect.”(Glennon, 2014)

Police leaders in the 1990’s realized that we cannot effectively serve our communities when they do not believe in us. Community Oriented Policing was their answer to that problem. Unfortunately, we are again entering an era where many of the people we serve do not trust us, understand our mission, or have faith in our ability to do the jobs we are paid to do. I know not everyone feels this way. I am often thanked by citizens for what I do.

However, I have also seen the opposite of gratitude for what I do. Some colleagues and I recently had a conversation while we were on our lunch break with a young female. She told us that she was writing a paper on discrimination in the criminal justice system and had a few questions for us. I was a little annoyed about being bothered during lunch, but I was also intrigued about where the discussion could go. She asked a question or two and then flat out told us that “her friends” believed we were all racist because we were police officers. We tried in vain to explain to her that was not true. She was not interested in anything we had to say. When I realized this was the case, I asked her what we could do to change that perspective. She

immediately said we, as a police department, could communicate better. As bad as I did not want to, after she insulted me, my character and the character of my coworkers, I concluded that she was right in that one statement.

Police officers truly do stand on that line protecting innocents from those that would do them harm while putting ourselves in harm's way. The most we ask for is for people to have an appreciation for what we do. But, can we really expect them to develop that understanding when they have no clue what we deal with day in and day out? One way to break down those walls between law enforcement and our communities is to communicate. We should let them know why we do things the way we do them. A Citizen Police Academy is a great tool in opening those lines of communication. All it takes is a little effort on our part to bring in good students that will spread the word, create a curriculum that is edifying and entertaining and have an open mind to learn from them as we hope they learn from us.

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