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Raising The Bar

In this paper we will discuss the importance of raising the minimum standards for Arkansas Law Enforcement officers during the hiring, training, and promotional process of their careers. Approximately forty years ago, the Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Training (CLEST) set basic guidelines for police departments within the state to utilize when hiring and training officers. This was the first attempt to take Arkansas law enforcement in a unified direction to help better service our communities. Since the minimum standards were put in place, the state's population and technological capabilities have grown at a greater pace than the progress of changes to raise the minimum standards. If we look to the answer as to why so many police officers never reach retirement, or get arrested, divorced, fall into alcoholism or drug use, or die from heart disease or suicide, the answer may be that we, as officers, have not demanded more stringent guidelines within our profession. Are we hiring officers to simply fill open positions or are we hiring them with the future of a full career in law enforcement in mind? It is my goal that this paper will not only sway the Commission as well as police administrators, but help officers understand that we have an ethical obligation to strive to continue our education while constantly seeking to enhance ourselves mentally, physically, and emotionally.

The Hiring Process

The hiring process for all officers begins by submitting an F-1 Initial Employment Form. This form allows the applicant to answer many qualification questions prior to the first interview. Employers are provided basic information of applicants which assist them with choosing those that appear to meet the criteria the employers seek and move those applicants through to the next

phase of the process. It is imperative to discuss several of the requirements on the F-1 that I believe need to be addressed.

Age Requirement

One of the qualification questions is if the applicant is verified to be at least twenty-one years of age. In my opinion, this is the first minimum standard that needs to be addressed. I have been in law enforcement for nineteen years. During my time of service I have witnessed several officers who met the age requirement of twenty-one, but should have been disqualified during the background check.

Most all the officers of that age seemed to have had issues concerning maturity. While it is true that there are exceptions to young males or females being mature beyond their age, most of the officers I have seen at this age struggled with proper behavior and making sound, non-emotionally prompted decisions. In addition, most twenty-one-year-old males and females are still in the process of transitioning from their teenage years into young adulthood. Many of them still retain friends that are eighteen or younger. It is extremely difficult for these young officers to properly and ethically carry out the duties and responsibilities contained in the oath they swore to uphold while balancing those against their social activities.

Another aspect to consider is that once a person turns twenty-one, they are legal to buy alcohol. This can be a dangerous facet considering that they have been entrusted to carry a gun and potentially make life and death decisions. Alcohol is a dangerous thing when mixed with maturity levels and responsibility to protect a community.

According to a ProCon.org article on “Minimum Legal Drinking Age”, “Newly-legal drinkers often purchase alcohol for their underage peers, creating a “trickle-down” effect.

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Surveys show that the most common source of alcohol among eighteen to twenty year olds is their twenty to twenty-four year old peers.” (procon.org) ProCon.org is a non-profit organization that prides its work on, if we “understand the issue, we then understand each other.” It would not just be a shame, but an embarrassment to the department for a newly hired twenty-one year old officer to be arrested and charged with contributing to a minor.

While typing this report, I stopped and conducted a brief interview with Corporal Corderro Earls. He is a ten year veteran of the Searcy Police Department. During the course of the interview I asked him how old he was when he was hired by the Searcy Police Department. He stated that he had been twenty-one when he began his career with the department. Corporal Earls stated that when he was hired he was a “border-line” alcoholic who was in a non-marital relationship with a female who had just lost a baby.

He continued to tell me that he was still hanging out with old friends who wanted to drink and “party” all the time. Corporal Earls added that when he would arrive at work for his shift, he avoided supervisors and administrators due to them constantly “preaching” to him about ethics and proper conduct and things he needed to be doing. Coupled with the responsibility to the community, Corporal Earls said that he felt as if the weight of the world was upon his shoulders. With all the pressure he felt at work, once he returned home after his shift, he would drink himself to sleep. I asked him if he felt that he was mature enough to have been hired at the age of twenty-one. Cord replied, “Absolutely not.”

It is my belief the minimum age for hiring a law enforcement officer in Arkansas should be raised to the age of twenty-three. One of the reasons is that the first sign of maturity is finishing something one has started. By age twenty-three, most young adults who attended

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college will have graduated by that age and more than likely have put their “partying” behind them. Most of them will be focused on beginning their careers and starting a family. Officers who have a higher education and starting families are more capable of making proper decisions, handle responsibility, and focus on their careers. Their decisions would more likely be based on what is right and wrong rather than what is “cool” and funny. Raising this age standard will bring the type of officers who not only work harder, but smarter.

Education

Out of all the minimum requirements, education is the one that I personally feel is the most important. For forty years the only educational requirement of a person seeking to become a police officer has been them earning a high school diploma or GED. However, in that same forty years, technology has moved forward in leaps and bounds, the state population has grown, and techniques for combating crime have become more advanced. The current population of Arkansas is 3,004,279 (census.gov). This is compared to 1978 when the population was 2,243,000 (population.us). Not only has the population increased, but so has the amount of crime.

Being a police officer takes a special type of person. I have heard some say this job is about the heart, and one either has one or they don't. I completely agree with them. However, being a doctor or a nurse takes a special type person, too. Many years ago doctors and nurses made house calls by horse and buggy. Most of the time they were paid with chickens, goats, or eggs. Many professions soon realized the need to raise the standards so that better service could be provided. Doctors, nurses, attorneys, and other professionals accomplished this by higher learning and training. This was the impetus of a new era, one that did away with “snake oil”

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salesman and witch doctors. It set a standard that exclaimed that if one wants to be in the medical profession, you must be willing to go the extra mile to earn the title of doctor or nurse. By implementing this standard it created a higher demand for the profession and alleviated substandard performances. With higher demand came better pay, more respect, and status with the communities where they work. If standards in law enforcement were raised it would help to assuage “gypsy police” which is a term that describes law enforcement officers that move from department to department because they either can’t work with the people in that community or they get fired for bad conduct (nytimes.com).

In the 1970’s men who had the reputation of being rough and tough were hired to work in law enforcement. Even Arkansas State Police had minimum physical requirements. Retired Arkansas State Police Special Agent Roger Ahlf stated that when he applied to be a trooper in 1977, the minimum height and weight requirement was 5’08” and 175lbs. Police departments wanted men who appeared intimidating and that could handle themselves on the side of the road. It was their frequent use of night sticks and lead slappers that helped to create the “good ole boy” stigma in law enforcement. Those days have mostly fallen to the wayside. In today’s law enforcement, we need officers who win fights on the side of the road using the six inches between their ears rather than their fists. One way this can be accomplished is by raising the educational requirement to either an Associate Degree or Bachelor Degree. Knowledge is true power and by pursuing these degrees, applicants have proven that their education is important. An educated officer is a more balanced officer.

Communication, whether verbal or written, is one of the greatest weapons law enforcement officers have in their arsenal. Good verbal communication skills can help a person prevent being hurt, or being angry on a traffic stop, or persuade a community to help a specific

cause. I am reminded of an axiom many veteran officers often state: “It is better to talk someone into handcuffs than it is to fight them into them.” Good education compliments good communication skills.

Physical Requirements

As an officer moves forward in the hiring process a physical examination has to be completed by a licensed physician and one must meet the physical requirements prescribed in Specification Form S-3.

“This requirement supplements Section 1002(3) (g) of the Regulations. It is in keeping with the concept that in order to render proper service to the community, a law enforcement officer must be physically sound and free of any defect which might adversely affect the performance of duty. The officer’s personal safety and the safety and lives of others will be endangered if these important physical qualifications are not met.”
(clestpublishpath.com)

The officer must complete a medical history that covers past known diseases, injuries, and surgical procedures. This medical history will be reviewed by the doctor before the actual physical takes place. When the doctor starts the physical examination, he or she is only required to check vision and hearing. My question is this: isn’t there more to performing the duties of a police officer than being able to hear and see? How about mobility? Does an officer not need to have the physical ability to meet daily stressors of the job? Why is there no state minimum requirement for a physical fitness exam? Citizens have two mental images of officers. One of those is an officer being “Superman” and wearing the uniform with a cape carrying a small child

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to safety. The other is prompted by media, whether social or other media groups, who portray numerous police cars parked in front of a doughnut shop.

After conducting some internet research I found that most major police departments require some form of a physical fitness exam prior to employment. The United States Capitol Police (USCP) has a pre-employment physical assessment test (PAT) that each potential recruit must pass before being considered for employment. The following is a breakdown of the USCP test that should be considered as an example as a potential state standard for Arkansas:

“The USCP PAT consists of a sequence of four job- related tasks. These tasks simulate situations that may be encountered while performing the duties of a USCP Police Officer. No specialized skills and/or knowledge are required to perform these tasks. The tasks are performed in a continuous manner with no stopping between stages.”

www.uscp.gov

Task One: Consist of three hundred and seventy-five feet run and at the end the recruit immediately goes into Task Two.

Task Two: Recruit runs up and down three flights of stairs four times and then moves to Task Three.

Task Three: Recruit must drag a 165 pound dummy forty feet before moving to Task Four.

Task Four: Recruit must complete pulling a pistol trigger thirty times with arm extended to complete the testing. This assessment test must be completed in less than three minutes and fifty-two seconds (3:52) regardless of age, or gender.” (www.uscp.gov)

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“The USCP stated that individuals capable of completing a one and one half mile run (1.5 miles) in less than thirteen minutes and fifty seconds (13:50) have a much higher likelihood of completing the USCP PAT.” (www.uscp.gov)

Categories for Aerobic Fitness (Based upon minutes used to complete 1.5 mile run)	
Greater than or equal to 14:00 Minutes	Poor
13:00 – 13:59 Minutes	Fair
12:00 – 12:59 Minutes	Average
11:00 – 11:59 Minutes	Good
10:00 – 10:59 Minutes	Excellent
Less than 10:00 Minutes	Superior

It is my opinion that all individual wanting to become a police officer should take it upon themselves to be physically fit enough to pass this entrance exam. When individuals take the time to prepare themselves for this type of test, I believe they also become more mentally prepared to become an officer than those that did not prepare or could not pass the test.

When I went to the police academy in Camden, Arkansas in July of 1999 (Class of 99C) we had officers that could not run the 1.5 miles required during the assessment. These men were then moved into what loving was called the “Clydesdales” group. For twelve weeks these men had to do extra physical fitness. They were overweight, heavy smokers, and did not care if they ever passed, because they knew all they needed was to pass the written exam each Friday. The time to set a standard in physical fitness for Arkansas Law Enforcement that is provided and evaluated by an outside department source is now!

There are a few departments across the state that do require a physical fitness exam. Most of these departments are larger and have a large support staff and greater resources to

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provide such testing. So how would smaller departments handle this expense? They wouldn't have to. What I propose is the state could assign the task of giving an initial written entrance exam and physical fitness assessment test to a qualified stated agency. The test would be given in multiple areas of the state on predetermined dates. Each individual would be required to pay a nominal fee to take the exams to help offset the cost of the program. Once the individual met the requirements they would be given a certified copy of completion to take and attach to the F-1 Initial Employment Form for each department at which they apply.

So how do we ensure veteran officers stay physically fit? Ultimately that falls on department administration, but we all know that most department administrators don't want to address the issue because they, themselves, can't pass a physical fitness test. If we don't continue utilizing the standards we have now, why bother having the standards at all? Even the state requires that each officer must qualify with their handguns each year. So why not require yearly physical fitness tests? How would the state manage such a requirement? Each police department would notify the state in advance of their physical fitness test dates. The state would pick departments at random and administer the test. No department would ever know when they would be tested by the state, therefore forcing each officer and supervisor to maintain some level of accountability in their departments. Any officer that failed the fitness test would be re-flagged for promotion, advancement, or lateral transfer until they successfully pass the fitness test.

After a predetermined amount of time an officer who still can't pass the fitness test would be relieved of their position from the department. Many would agree this may be an extreme measure, but we are living in a world of extreme times. There has never been a time in law enforcement history where we have been under attack more than we have in the world of

today. There is no way to win a war of words with those who wish to harm us. However, we can take the initiative to raise our own standards and root out the ones who do not belong in the Thin Blue Line family.

Training

When it comes to training in law enforcement, I would say the state standards are close to par. We should always be looking at advancing our training in skills and techniques. I believe there are currently two stages of training in Arkansas for officers. Every officer should always strive to continue training at its highest level. Training should be met with a positive attitude and ended with an After Action Review (AAR). AAR's are a constructive critique from both the instructor and trainee. This allows both parties to better understand what needs to be improved, thereby helping create better training programs and officers.

Stage One

The first stage of training is an officer's basic training at the Arkansas Law Enforcement Training Academy (ALETA). "This is a thirteen week course that covers basic police skills in criminal investigation, accident investigation, firearms, defensive tactics, officer safety techniques, traffic law, criminal law, civil liability and other legal aspects of law enforcement, crime prevention, crisis intervention, cultural diversity, and other areas of importance to officers beginning their career." (clest.org)

During the thirteen weeks of training, a recruit's day is structured on a paramilitary style format where each officer is dressed in ALETA designated attire and is required to conduct physical fitness activities as well as drill and ceremony activities. I agree this is a good way of

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conducting the basic training academy. However, as I stated earlier in my paper, the physical fitness needs to be changed. If I were in charge of physical fitness training, I would structure the training in a more rigid format along the lines of military basic training. I believe ALETA, no matter which campus, should uniformly hold students accountable by the same standards of weapons qualification. If one doesn't pass the physical fitness test, then just like failing the hand gun qualification, that recruit is dismissed from the academy.

Stage Two

The second stage of an officer's training would be the post certification training or continuous education hours. The majority of this training takes place at the Criminal Justice Institute (CJI) in Little Rock, Arkansas. CJI gives officers the ability to shape their careers by taking specialized training in drug enforcement, criminal investigations, law enforcement administration, and some classes that applies hours toward college degrees. In my nineteen year tenure in law enforcement, I have witnessed CJI grow in so many great ways under the leadership of Doctor Cheryl May. This is a true statement as much as a heartfelt statement. Dr. May has gained the love and respect of all law enforcement within our great state. She has helped further the careers of so many officers as well as bettering the lives of citizens in our communities.

I would like to propose a new idea or direction that would have CJI creating a few new courses geared to helping officers managing their marriages. I came up with this idea during this SLES class while listening to Doctor Jack Enter's presentation. I think he would be the person to create a course on marriage. I believe that for this class to be the most effective, it should be

mandatory that each officer who attends should be accompanied by their spouse. The happier an officer is at home the better they will perform at work.

Promotions

Promotion... a word so many officers look forward too. They plan for it, work for it, dream about it, and talk about it. If a department has not planned accordingly, with policy, procedures, and guidelines then the word promotion can be a nightmare for administrators. When done wrong, and in some cases where departments have just used the “Good Ole Boy” system, lawsuits have been filed. In order to advance the quality of leadership there needs to be a state standard when it comes to promoting officers. State guidelines should regulate how departments promote officers. We need to stop promoting supervisors and start promoting leaders! Great leaders create a better work environment where officers are happier, feel more secure, thereby making them more productive.

Policy

When a new officer begins a career he or she usually starts in the patrol division where they are assigned to a Field Training Officer (FTO). It is the responsibilities of the FTO to train the new officer in all aspects of patrol as well as departmental policy. Every department should have a policy manual that is issued to each officer. There should be detailed information outlining a course or principle action adopted or proposed by the department. This helps the officer to focus their careers in a positive direction for a successful future. The policy manual should clearly set forth a strategy for each officer to follow when dealing with certain situations. It will provide the officer with an approach when dealing with leadership and a place to take a

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stance. Learning the department's policy is the first step for an officer when thinking about promotions. When officers are prudent in practicing policy they develop wisdom.

Procedures

All great leaders should help their officers lay the ground work for their careers. Leaders should meet regularly with officers and help guide them on their path to success. Procedures should be ingrained into new officers. A department's way of conducting business is important for the officer to learn because when done correctly it reflects well upon the department. Within the procedures there should be an outline detailing the promotion process. Officers should be able to clearly understand the series of actions during the promotion process. There should be a certain order for officers to follow to know they are on the right track for their future. As leaders, we should be guiding our officers toward success instead of "administrate" them into failure. I have seen too many promoted into supervision roles and then want to keep all information to themselves because they believe it gives them so sort of power over their junior officers. In my opinion this is a sign of weakness and it should be dealt with accordingly. Too many supervisors believe that if they are not constantly pointing out the mistakes or faults of their subordinates, then they truly aren't "supervising." They administrate rather than lead. By simply "administrating," they break down officers instead of guiding them in positive ways by leadership and example.

Guidelines

Guidelines are a great way for young officers to learn how to clear the "muddy waters" of the department politics. Guidelines can be general rules, principles, or a simple piece of advice. Guidelines come from seasoned officers who have treaded the waters and have learned from

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mistakes. You don't have to have stripes on your sleeves or brass on your collar to be a leader. One of my favorite leadership quotes comes from General George Patton, "Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way!" We have so many supervisors in leadership positions that don't care. They are either retired on duty, just plain mean, or just don't care to help. All they care about is collecting a paycheck. They don't want others to succeed because they feel that it will make them look bad. Administrators sometimes find it very hard to deal with such employees. Great leaders care about others and want them to succeed. True leaders want to train subordinate officers to take over their position one day and are always the first to share the guidelines they have learned with new officers.

Generally speaking, most of your first line leaders are FTO's. They are willing to share their stories and experiences with trainees. They give daily instructions and directions on how to properly do the job. They are there to provide suggestions and advice when a trainee is learning how to problem solve. FTO's are very critical to the development of young officers and they lay the foundation for that officer's leadership style.

In order to improve the minimum standards each department should have an extensive FTO program that is updated with current training procedures. Administrators and first line leadership should pay particular attention to this program to ensure that it is conducted according to policy. The future of the department depends on this program. A bad FTO program can be costly to a department. Bad FTO's can make life so difficult on a new officer that they move to another department or quit law enforcement all together. Departments can lose a lot of money that has been invested into quality officers due to a poorly ran FTO program.

Conclusion

As we think back on this paper we must keep in mind that our first priority is to the people we serve in our communities. They are our families, friends and neighbors. As police officers we have taken an oath to protect and serve. We must not forget that there is more to protecting than saving lives. We have a moral and ethical obligation to protect our citizen's constitutional rights, not only from law enforcement, but our own government as well. We are to stand between our citizens and a tyrannical government at all cost in order to protect their freedom. I'm afraid there will come a day when officers will have to take that stand to ensure that our children's freedom remains whole. We must consider all aspects of this paper in order to raise the state minimum standards. Better quality officers will help bridge the division between officers and our communities.

A great American, Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?" As police officers, are we asking ourselves that question? If not, we should begin asking it on a daily basis. Dr. King also said, "If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward." I believe it's the same for law enforcement and our standards. We must keep raising the bar, so we can better serve the communities we love.

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