Staffing Ancillary Functions – Part 3

By Chief Marlin Price (Retired)

As we delve deeper into the series, we shift our focus to the staffing of department ancillary functions. This article, the third in the series, provides valuable insights and strategies for discussing these issues with your city manager or mayor.

The detailed workload model described in the first article is the most accurate method of determining patrol staffing. The most precise method for determining criminal investigation staffing is using a detailed and time-consuming workload model or the national benchmarks. Unfortunately, there are no models for determining whether the department needs specialized units or the appropriate staffing for the various other functions within the department. In order to justify additional staff for these functions, chiefs must assemble data that proves the need, providing a solid foundation for staffing decisions. This emphasis on data-driven decisions will keep you informed and confident in your proposals.

Let's say you are chief in a more blue-collar community with what you believe is a significant drug problem. Your patrol officers indicate they believe it to be a problem, but they cannot adequately address the issue because they are answering too many calls. Your current uncommitted time in patrol is just below 30 percent, which generally means your officers are correct; they only have short periods in between calls to do any self-initiated activity. Clearly, you can ask for additional patrol staffing, but in comparison to other city priorities, this may not be well received by the manager or council. However, developing a proposal for a special unit (maybe a sergeant and two officers) to concentrate on the drug issues, employ focused deterrence on the drug dealers and organized criminals in town, keep track of sex offenders, and conduct call reduction programs might have a higher priority. Armed with actual data on the number of drug-related calls, arrests, and drug gang activity, along with data showing where the violent crimes are occurring and where drug arrests are made, you can make a compelling case for a safer community. This data is crucial in making informed decisions and presenting a strong case.

As indicated earlier, there are no standard formulas for these specialized units. Smaller towns may want to develop regional activities with other area departments to include shared resources for crime analysis, crime scene search, dispatch operations, jail operations, animal control, and animal shelter operations. This collaborative approach not only optimizes resources but also fosters a sense of community among law enforcement professionals. Most small agencies do not have the personnel or time necessary to maintain the level of training needed for a SWAT team, but a regional SWAT unit can be developed.

In smaller departments, we often find sworn officers doing jobs civilians can easily do. Even patrol officers and CID detectives are doing things a civilian can do in the field or an investigative unit. If the department is short-handed and has difficulty hiring officers, consider creating a couple of civilian patrol assistants to work daily from 10 am to 10 pm.These are the hours most calls are received in smaller communities. These civilian patrol assistants should have a utility vehicle or pick-up to

respond to field events. They can handle most patrol activities that do not require an armed officer. They can take report-only calls, wait on wreckers, direct traffic at accident scenes, conduct crime scene work, assist animal control when necessary, and be a backup dispatcher. In other words, they can be as busy as regular patrol officers, but because they are not armed, they do not need all the required training and maintenance that sworn officers do. They are faster to find and hire and are usually paid less than regular officers. Civilian investigative aids can assist similarly in investigative units.

For some reason, police chiefs always believe they need more officers to do a better job. That is not always accurate. What officers do during their workday is more important than how many officers are present. Since staffing a police department is discretionary, there are no laws or guidelines on how many officers a city must provide; chiefs must be aware of the city's budgetary constraints. Our job is to do the best job we can with the staff we are given. Sure, we need to keep the city leadership aware of our staffing needs and what we could do with additional staff, but we also need to be prepared to meet those expectations if we are given extra resources.

Providing hard data on the increases in service calls, increasing crime, more open records requests, more drug-related incidents, or more significant technological needs can convince city managers and mayors of the need, but the city's financial picture must be considered. One of the long-held opinions of most city managers is that you should not ask for additional positions if you can fill the department. If you have been three short in sworn officer staffing for the past two years, it makes no sense to a city manager to put more money in your budget for additional officers when you can't hire them. That money might be better used buying a new trash truck this year. However, a well-crafted strategic plan can provide a roadmap for the growth of the department, instilling confidence in the city manager (mayor) and council.Part of that strategic plan would be to grow the department by X officers over the next 4-5 years. In each year of the strategic plan, say on July 1, if you are full, the city will consider adding three officers. If you are down one officer, the city will consider adding two new positions, down two – add one, or down three – no additional positions. This staging process allows for ordered growth and reduces the department's overall impact on the city budget each year.

The patrol workload analysis and national benchmarks can provide cities with clear evidence of department patrol and investigative needs. However, the staffing of ancillary functions must be based on a clear need supported by accurate data. Sometimes, this data may take a year or two to collect and present, but that's what good chiefs do.

The TPCA is committed to assisting Texas agencies in determining their best staffing levels. To speak with one of our retired chiefs who conducts 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 Fallen Officer Fund.