

Police Volunteers and Ethics By Carol Schmidt, Officer

Today, the public has become more actively involved with their local law enforcement agencies. With staffing shortages, departments have welcomed the extra resource that volunteers offer as a partial solution to some of their needs.¹ But, the increase in citizens volunteering with law enforcement agencies has added to the issues raised concerning those individuals who exercise authority and their ethical standards. How do law enforcement volunteers fit into this discussion?

The Clearwater, Florida, Police Department has had a successful volunteer program for several years and can offer some answers that may assist other agencies. Starting with about 12 steady volunteers nearly 10 years ago, the department now has 84 dedicated individuals who have proven their worth in countless ways. They have assisted citizens in potentially life-threatening situations, observed and reported crimes in progress that resulted in arrests, and assisted officers with many tasks. Based on the national average hourly value of a volunteer's time of \$17.19 in 2003,² the department calculated that the 14,426 hours their volunteers contributed equated to \$247,991. While this represents a remarkable demonstration of community support, it also illustrates the need for consistent oversight, comprehensive training, and well-developed guidelines that can help volunteers thrive in the law enforcement environment.

Advantages of a Volunteer Program

From an administrator's point of view, the use of volunteers offsets expenses without lowering the accomplishments of the agency. Volunteers do not replace sworn officers or any paid positions; instead, they enhance the quality of service that the organization can provide to its community.

Agencies use volunteers in numerous ways, from administrative tasks to assisting officers on the street. Administrative volunteers can help with data entry, filing, supply distribution and many other office duties. Patrol volunteers can augment sworn officers in non-hazardous situations, such as parking enforcement, ordinance violations, traffic control and special events.

From their viewpoint, volunteers gain a high sense of purpose by helping to keep their community safe and contributing to the agency's mission. They come to the law enforcement arena with different agendas and various backgrounds. Their reasons include looking toward a career in law enforcement, improving their promotional potential in their civilian jobs by volunteering, socializing with like-minded individuals, and giving back to their community. What they all have in common is a very high regard for law enforcement. Many other organizations need volunteers, but those citizens want to be involved in law enforcement. They also possess a variety of skills that they have acquired throughout their lives. Given adequate training, a friendly work environment, and a strong sense of belonging, volunteers can become extremely loyal and help the agency achieve its goals and objectives. To this end, they should reflect the organization's high professional standards.

Ethics and the Volunteer

Because volunteers can range in age from 18 – 90, they bring many different experiences, beliefs, and standards to the agency. Those with little life experience may not have a mature sense of ethics, whereas retired volunteers may have well-developed morals. This highlights the need for straightforward guidelines and a code of ethics adhered to by all personnel in the agency. Moreover, the department's culture will exemplify the ethical standards for volunteers.

Of course, law enforcement members have learned through advanced education and training what is necessary to be involved in the profession. They hold themselves to a higher standard of ethics than do most others in society. Volunteers have not had the same training, but their exposure to departmental personnel will influence how they conduct themselves. And, their training should bring them to the high caliber of ethics held by the agency.

Each department has a similar code of ethics for its members, and the same should hold true for volunteers. Difference in the performance of an officer compared with that of a volunteer will exist, but the rest of the code, such as accountability and responsibility, will apply. For example, volunteers must understand the importance of confidentiality and integrity. They public have the right to security and privacy; therefore, volunteers must remember to never improperly divulge information. In addition, they must behave in a manner that does not discredit the agency. As with officer, volunteers also should pursue the never-ending process of personal and professional development. This does not mean that they must sacrifice reflexivity as individuals. Their own personal ethics also will guide them.

Volunteers and the Agency

All members of the agency must deal consistently with volunteers. If favoritism occurs, animosity will develop among the volunteers and lessen the integrity of the organization in their eyes. Everyone should be governed by the same set of rules. Sometimes, rules have to bend, but if they break, it will reflect on all those connected with the agency.

It is important to know as much about the volunteer as possible to make sure that the person's ethics meet the agency's standards. During the processing of new volunteers, the department can obtain information from criminal histories, background checks, and interviews that will supply an initial idea of their ethical practices. During training, the agency should stress its moral standards, values and ethics. As new volunteers associate with other volunteers and employees, the department can determine if their ethics will blend with those of the agency.

Volunteers do not have the same constant contact with the law enforcement organization that officers have, so what they see and hear on one occasion may influence their perceptions of officers and they way the respond to the agency's ethical standards. As volunteers have more contact with the members of the department, they will come to understand how the organization operates. This process may take a little longer that with paid employees because volunteers may have less frequent exposure to agency personnel.

Volunteers in Action

Once trained and issued a uniform, identification card, equipment, and vehicle, volunteers begin their foray into the community representing the agency. Sometimes, this leads volunteers to think that they have more authority than they do. Therefore, the department should monitor new volunteers for signs of their venturing beyond the guidelines, Examples would include stopping a vehicle for speeding or trying to move trespassers, rather than notifying officers of the situation. Such actions could comprise a volunteer's safety, a primary factor, but they also could generate complaints. Volunteers can curb such behavior by working in pairs and remembering that they serve as the "eyes and ears" of the agency.

Sometimes, volunteers do not realize that their actions could pose an ethical consideration. For example, they might show political preferences by wearing campaign buttons or conduct

personal errand while patrolling. Being in uniform and stopping to buy alcohol on the way home, for instance, would not reflect well on the volunteer program or the agency. Although they may have done this many times while employed with other businesses, they must realize that they wear a uniform and represent the police department.

Volunteers must understand that they cannot use their positions for personal gain. They are expected to adhere to certain recognized principles and practices in the conduct of their public lives. They should know that their private lives also will be affected as they become part of the law enforcement family and the public sees them in uniform. Volunteers also should not accept gratuities, including food and beverages.³ Sometimes, these temptations result from the interaction between society and the law enforcement community and not the individual volunteer. Specific, written guidelines can assist them in making decisions about their actions and in conducting themselves appropriately.

The law enforcement culture also should assume some of the responsibility for creating the environment that will either encourage or discourage ethical values. As they do law enforcement officers, citizens will scrutinize volunteers' action, whether done in public or private. Volunteers must understand that they cannot abuse the authority of the uniform but have to display the highest degree of honesty, loyalty and integrity to the agency and the community that they represent. It is paramount for all volunteer to realize that the program is only as effective as the individual performing the task. Instilling a sense of team spirit can help maintain the ethical standards of the agency whether volunteers work alone or in groups.

Conclusion

Law enforcement agencies should ensure that all members, paid employees or volunteers, are aware of the attitudes and actions expected of them. With this knowledge, all personnel will have a clear perspective of their responsibilities according to the ethical standards of their organization.

The Clearwater, Florida, Police Department has had a successful volunteer program for nearly 10 years. By expecting the same exacting standards from its volunteers that it does from its paid personnel, the department has maintained the integrity of the profession while welcoming the support of these dedicated citizens who have enhanced the level of service it provides to the community it serves.

Code of Ethics of the Clearwater Police Department

As a law enforcement officer, my fundamental duty is to serve mankind; to safeguard lives and property, to protect the innocent against deception, the weak against oppression or intimidation, and the peaceful against violence or disorder; and to respect the constitutional rights of all men to liberty, equality and justice.

I will keep my private life unsullied as an example to all; maintain courageous calm in the face of anger, scorn or ridicule; develop self-restraint and be constantly mindful of the welfare of others. Honest in thought and deed in both my personal and official life, I will be exemplary in obeying the laws of the land and the regulation so my department. Whatever I see or hear of a confidential nature or that is confided to me in my official capacity will be kept ever secret unless revelation is necessary in the performance of my duty.

I will never act officiously or permit personal feeling, prejudices, animosities, or friendships to influence my decisions. With no compromise for crime and with relentless prosecution of criminals,

I will enforce the law courteously and appropriately without fear or favor, malice or ill will, never employing unnecessary force or violence and never accepting gratuities.

I recognize the badge of my office as a symbol of public faith, and I accept it as a public trust to be held so long as I am true to the ethics of the police service. I will constantly strive to achieve these objectives and ideals, dedicating myself before God to my chosen profession, law enforcement.

¹ For additional information, see the Volunteers In Police Service(VIPS) Web site,
<http://www.policevolunteers.org>

² <http://www.independentsector.org>

³ For additional information see Mike White, “ The Problem with Gratuities”. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 2002, 20-23; Mike Corely, “Gratuities: There Is No Fee Lunch”. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October 2005, 10-13.