



## A Recruiting Boom for Small Town Departments?

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July 9, 2020

In cities across the country, elected officials are publicly scapegoating police officers for all of society's ills. Many are insisting that racially motivated police brutality is the greatest threat to their citizens, even when the facts to support such an assertion are strikingly and shamefully absent. Many are advocating that police departments be de-funded as some form of punishment.

These actions leave officers guessing as to what policies to follow in the line of duty and what rules of engagement are actually applicable, depending on the political whims of their mayors and city council members. Some police leaders are clearly unwilling to defend the reputation of their agencies in these trying times. The "silent majority" that polling data tells us supports the police is eerily silent in many of our cities. And when this toxic mix leads to de-policing and spikes in criminal activity, elected officials feign surprise and confusion as to how it is that the officers would feel unsupported.

But while these predominantly larger agencies dominate national headlines, **there is a much different reality for many officers in mostly rural and/or suburban agencies.** In the communities that they serve, angry demonstrators have not dominated the streets and elected officials have not made blanket anti-police statements as part of their political platforms. **For these smaller agencies, who have often struggled to recruit and retain officers, the leadership failures impacting many larger agencies provide a rare opportunity to attract trained lateral hire officers to their agencies, as well as those new to the profession who are repelled by the lack of support shown to so many officers in the country's larger departments.**

In the face of economic uncertainty stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, many officers who are interested in a change are not in a financial position to simply walk off the job. This seems

particularly true for men and women who are mid-career, have a passion for law enforcement, but are weary of remaining with a department where they feel forced to engage in a “no contact, no complaint” approach to policing rather than pro-active engagement.

Similarly, many young men and women who have planned on a career in law enforcement are facing an economic downturn where career options outside of law enforcement seem limited. But they are unlikely to flock to agencies where the chief, elected officials and prominent activists all believe that their police department is a problem rather than an asset.

Job applicants have historically gravitated toward financially stable careers, including public safety. What makes this economic climate different is that it has been coupled with the political climate described above and with a “de-fund the police” movement that make those positions in policing all but stable. **But in more stable departments that have a pent-up demand for officers and a supportive political leadership, there could be a unique recruiting opportunity.**

### Why YOUR Department?

The question for men and women who have invested years into a career in law enforcement may not be “*why stay*” in policing as much as “*where should you go?*” Similarly, those who have dreamed for years of becoming officers are likely to find large city agencies with a plethora of specialized units much less appealing than a department where they have public support and clear organizational directives. So, what makes your agency attractive? Smaller agencies may want to consider some of the following strategies:

- **Reach out to your local elected officials, prosecutors and other leaders from the community (religious, business, etc.) to be a part of the recruiting process.** Consider including them in your recruiting messaging and in-person outreach efforts. They could be an enormous part of communicating to potential applicants that public and political support for law enforcement is real in your community.
- Ask your **Chief, Sheriff and other command staff** to take the lead in recruiting. The public missteps and over-the-top apologies from police leadership has been a source of frustration for officers and potential officers across the country. **Pride in the organization and the profession should be honestly and unapologetically expressed by your agency’s leadership in your recruiting efforts.**
- Look for **tangible demonstrations of public support in your community.** Has there been a cost-of-living tax increase recently approved by the taxpayers? Has there been any polling done of public support? Are “Back the Blue” signs prominent in your local

businesses and front yards? If so, consider prominently utilizing these demonstrations of support in your recruiting efforts.

- **Are officers willing to give public testimonials as to why they take pride in their work and plan on staying?** Even better—are they willing to personally reach out to officers in other agencies who are looking to make a change? After all, your officers can be your best recruiters.
- **Do you know your turnover numbers? Do they reflect that very few officers choose to leave once hired?** If so, possibly even more than their testimonials, your officers' consistent decision to remain a part for your organization could speak volumes to potential recruits.
- **Does your community have a lower cost of living than the larger agencies from which you are seeking lateral hires?** If lower pay actually goes further in your area in terms of housing, for instance, consider prominently advertising that fact. A six-figure salary in a larger department might not mean much if there's nothing left over after rent or mortgage payments. Analyze the median cost of a home or monthly rent in your area versus the larger cities and be able to communicate those in real dollars to potential applicants.
- **Do officers working for a larger agency already live in your community?** Does the commute seem longer when they are keenly aware of the lack of support they can expect on the job? Consider pitching the idea of working where they live. Presumably they decided to raise their families in your community for a reason, and that should be viewed as something to capitalize on.

None of these strategies present a “magic bullet” for rural or suburban agencies looking to hire qualified men and women, but these are the sorts of approaches that agencies should consider when looking for a silver lining to the current challenges facing so many law enforcement officers. **The political and economic realities of the moment present opportunities for police departments and sheriff's offices to recruit eager and qualified men and women who love the profession but are not interested in working in environments where their sworn and elected leadership has abandoned them.**

## About the Author

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing their exposure to costly liability. A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and Public Safety Instructor with Dolan Consulting Group.

His training courses include [Recruiting and Hiring for Law Enforcement](#), [Confronting the Toxic Officer](#), [Performance Evaluations for Public Safety](#), [Making Discipline Stick®](#), and [Supervisor Liability for Public Safety](#).