



## Managing Civilianization in Law Enforcement

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The shortage of qualified applicants for sworn law enforcement positions shows no signs of improving in the coming years.<sup>i</sup> As many agency leaders begin to adapt to lower staffing numbers, **difficult conversations are taking place around the continued viability of sworn officers performing jobs that could be done by civilians with less training and at a lower cost.** But how can agencies accomplish this without triggering unnecessary risks to officer safety and public safety?

We all know that there are a variety of factors behind this staffing crisis. Public support for the police in some quarters has declined markedly, fueled by biased media coverage and exploited by some politicians and activist groups. But beneath these law enforcement-specific issues, there are more fundamental challenges that are impacting multiple sectors of the economy.

Due to declining birth rates since the 1980s, the percentage of the population that is between the ages of 21 and 40 continues to decline.<sup>ii</sup> Obesity in America continues to increase, as overall physical fitness declines, making it difficult to find physically qualified candidates.<sup>iii</sup> The prevalence of mental health issues and substance abuse has skyrocketed since 2008, making it more challenging to find psychologically qualified candidates.<sup>iv</sup> Finally, as is the case in multiple sectors of our economy, **law enforcement agencies face an unprecedented labor market trend in which employees have resigned from their jobs in massive numbers to pursue jobs that offer better working conditions and better work-family life balance—the very things that sworn law enforcement careers often cannot offer.**<sup>v</sup>

Through our experience assisting law enforcement agencies with their recruiting and retention efforts, we have repeatedly observed that outliers *do* exist: there are law enforcement agencies with strong leadership, serving communities with high levels of support for the police, that are

having few difficulties filling their officer vacancies. They are recruiting and retaining their employees at a high rate. These agencies are noteworthy exceptions to the national trend, and their work should be applauded and studied by other agencies.

However, most law enforcement agencies, especially large and mid-sized urban agencies, are constantly struggling to find qualified candidates to fill their sworn officer vacancies. In previous articles, we have recommended a number of evidence-based strategies for attracting more qualified applicants.<sup>vi</sup> In this article, we will propose an additional measure that agencies can use to ease the pressure to fill sworn officer vacancies—increased civilianization.

**The necessity for officers to respond to the day-to-day needs of their communities must take precedence. Claims that many sworn officers are performing invaluable work in administrative capacities on the day shift may be legitimate in many cases. However, these arguments seem unlikely to persuade the public as staffing numbers plummet, police presence in the field diminishes, and 911 response times climb. Law enforcement leaders should begin planning accordingly.**

### What is Civilianization?

**Civilianization is the policy of identifying positions within the organization that do not require arrest powers and the legal capacity to use force and filling these positions with non-sworn personnel.**<sup>vii</sup>

For generations, law enforcement agencies have employed non-sworn personnel in some capacity, especially as it relates to clerical work. Since the 1960s, however, population growth, economic recessions and the 1960-1993 rise in crime pushed many law enforcement agencies to expand the roles of civilians within law enforcement agencies.<sup>viii</sup>

For example, prior to the 1960s, police dispatchers, parking enforcement officers, animal control officers, crossing guards, paperwork clerks, crime lab technicians and motor pool employees were exclusively sworn officers in many agencies across the country. In some communities, the police even handled the ambulance service.<sup>ix</sup> Over the last six decades, these positions have transitioned to non-sworn personnel without any great decline in the quality of police services.<sup>x</sup> In fact, today, we commonly think of these positions as civilian positions, not sworn officer duties.

It is important to remember, however, that when such civilianization was first suggested in the 1960s, there were outcries by police executives and police unions alike that non-sworn employees were incapable of performing these tasks in a proficient manner. There was concern that civilians would not have the requisite knowledge of the geography of the city or police procedures to be

effective dispatchers. Claims were made that officers and citizens would die if police officers and firefighters were replaced by civilians in the dispatch center.<sup>xi</sup>

Obviously, the civilianization of police-fire dispatch did not result in a widespread surge of deaths or notable decline in emergency services. If anything, the civilianization of dispatch centers improved dispatch quality while reducing its personnel costs. The same could be said for parking enforcement and animal control enforcement. Despite their greater face-to-face interaction with the public, and the ability to enforce low-level laws, the transition of these positions to civilians has not resulted in a crisis of assaults and deaths of these civilian employees.<sup>xiii</sup>

**It is likely that any present-day suggestions for further civilianization will face similar opposition. This opposition is understandable, due to the fact that change is inherently difficult and the fact that civilianization could mean more officers dealing with day-to-day patrol responsibilities that they have not been required to take on for years. But, it is only fair to put these concerns in historical perspective and keep in mind that many concerns about civilianization in the past proved to be unfounded.**

### **What are the Benefits?**

What are the benefits of greater civilianization to the law enforcement agency? **The benefits include filling needed vacancies in the field with experienced officers, reducing personnel costs, and expanding the potential employee applicant pool. When positions that are currently filled by sworn personnel are filled by civilian personnel instead, it frees up sworn officers to fill vacancies in the patrol division where officers are currently needed most.** Even if the department waits until a sworn officer retires from the position before converting it to a civilian position, it still prevents the creation of a new vacancy in the patrol division since an officer will not leave the street to fill the vacated administrative job.

As civilians are commonly paid a lower wage than sworn personnel, civilianization results in lower costs to the agency. But despite offering a lower wage, **civilianization of some positions can actually *expand* the potential applicant pool. Since civilianized positions should not require the authority to use force, why would such employees need to demonstrate excellent physical fitness? Physical disqualifiers for sworn positions would not prevent someone from managing the department computer network, working dispatch, filing evidence, or examining fingerprints in a crime lab. Employees in civilian positions have greater opportunities for a normal work schedule, and less physical danger and associated stress than that experienced by sworn personnel.**

All of these factors likely work together to increase the number of individuals willing to apply for a civilian position. **Individuals who might be unwilling, or unqualified, to apply for a sworn**

**officer position may be well-suited for a civilian position.** This creates a larger hiring pool for these positions. Such circumstances may also impact sworn personnel in three positive ways.

First, retiring officers who are interested in transitioning to a civilian position within the department in retirement would be able to do so and stay involved with the organization without the sacrifices to physical safety and work-life balance that come with sworn field operations.

Second, some officers who have been placed on temporary light duty assignments that have become permanent due to a variety of health impairments may also be able to transition to a civilian position, adding value to the organization in a manner similar to that of retired officers.

Third, there is also the likelihood that some individuals will join the department as civilians, without an accurate understanding of what real police work is like, or not being able to see themselves as sworn officers. However, after a few years of working inside the agency and seeing police work first-hand, they may realize the job fits them and their skills. In this way, civilianization also serves as a pipeline for recruiting sworn personnel. Many agencies currently employ sworn officers who began their careers in a civilian position.

**Civilianization, if done properly, clearly offers many benefits for law enforcement agencies.**

### **What Positions Should Be Civilianized?**

What positions could, or should, be filled by non-sworn staff? **The main criteria is a position that does not require arrest powers and the legal capacity to use force.** Across the nation today, in the majority of law enforcement agencies, dispatchers, parking enforcement officers, animal control officers, crossing guards, administrative clerks, crime lab technicians, IT network technicians and motor pool employees are non-sworn civilians.<sup>xiii</sup>

Is your agency falling behind the national trend by employing sworn officers in any of these positions? In this era of skyrocketing violent crime and cycles of violent civil unrest, isn't there a greater need for these sworn personnel to be out on the street?

**What additional positions might be civilianized? Some law enforcement agencies have hired civilians (often retired detectives) to conduct the background investigation portion of the recruiting process. Other agencies are beginning to civilianize most of the personnel engaged in the recruiting and selection process. Some large police departments, initially because of call volume and later because of the pandemic, utilize call centers where citizens file police reports for minor incidents over the phone. If no one responds to the scene in such cases, the question becomes, why does the person taking the report have to be a sworn officer?**

**Some agencies have begun utilizing civilians as investigators in their internal affairs division, taking initial statements from citizen complaints. Public relations/public information positions do not require the ability to arrest and use force.** In some cases, civilians with the right public relations experience may perform these functions as well or better than the sworn personnel currently in those positions.

Regarding law enforcement agencies that employ aircraft or watercraft, why would the pilots and crew of these craft need to be sworn personnel? Since vehicle crash reports are a civil function performed by the police, can this function be assigned to trained civilians? Sworn officers could perform the initial emergency response and enforcement functions if there was evidence of a crime or traffic misdemeanor (DUI, driving while suspended, etc.), while the civilian employees could handle the traffic direction, accident investigation and completion of the report.

Is there a good reason that the administrative services branch of the department would need to employ sworn personnel? After all, do any of these positions require making an arrest or employing physical force? If not, then why would the person supervising these personnel need to be a sworn officer as well? Wouldn't it be more fitting that the person supervising the administrative division be an individual who worked his or her way up through the ranks in that division? Such a person would have a greater understanding of the daily operations and experiences of the administrative division and its staff.

### **Conclusion**

Each law enforcement agency will have to assess the plausibility of these civilianization options based on the particularities of their operations and staffing realities. Agency leaders will find some of the aforementioned civilianization options more plausible than others. But, for the vast majority of agencies facing sworn staffing challenges, greater civilianization should be considered as a viable option for maintaining operational effectiveness in the coming years.

We know that much of the law enforcement profession is experiencing a crisis in recruiting and retention. We know that the skyrocketing crime rates across the nation and persistent civil unrest situations require as many cops on the street as possible. **We need to take a sober look at where the sworn officers have been assigned within the organization and determine which serves the greater needs of the community—a sworn officer in an administrative role at a desk, or a sworn officer backing up his or her colleagues out on the street. It is not an easy leadership decision to make—it is a decision that requires courage and fortitude. But now is the time to make these difficult decisions.**

## About the Authors

### **Matt Dolan, J.D.**

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and Public Safety Instructor with Dolan Consulting Group.

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### **Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.**

Richard R. Johnson, PhD, is a trainer and researcher with Dolan Consulting Group. He has decades of experience teaching and training on various topics associated with criminal justice, and has conducted research on a variety of topics related to crime and law enforcement. He holds a bachelor's degree in public administration and criminal justice from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) at Indiana University, with a minor in social psychology. He possesses a master's degree in criminology from Indiana State University. He earned his doctorate in criminal justice from the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati with concentrations in policing and criminal justice administration.

Dr. Johnson has published more than 50 articles on various criminal justice topics in academic research journals, including *Justice Quarterly*, *Crime & Delinquency*, *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Police Quarterly*. He has also published more than a dozen articles in law enforcement trade journals such as the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, *Police Chief*, *Law & Order*, *National Sheriff*, and *Ohio Police Chief*. His research has primarily focused on police-citizen interactions, justice system responses to domestic violence, and issues of police administration and management. Dr. Johnson retired as a full professor of criminal justice at the University of Toledo in 2016.

Prior to his academic career, Dr. Johnson served several years working within the criminal justice system. He served as a trooper with the Indiana State Police, working uniformed patrol in Northwest Indiana. He served as a criminal investigator with the Kane County State's Attorney Office in Illinois, where he investigated domestic violence and child sexual assault cases. He

served as an intensive probation officer for felony domestic violence offenders with the Illinois 16th Judicial Circuit. Dr. Johnson is also a proud military veteran having served as a military police officer with the U.S. Air Force and Air National Guard, including active duty service after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Before that, he served as an infantry soldier and field medic in the U.S. Army and Army National Guard.

His training courses include [Reporting Accurate Traffic Stop Data: Evidence-Based Best Practices](#), and [Safe Places: Protecting Places of Worship from Violence and Crime](#).

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