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Step Up to Law Enforcement: A Successful Strategy for Recruiting Women into the Law Enforcement Profession

By Lianne M. Tuomey, Chief, University of Vermont Police Services, Burlington, Vermont, and Lieutenant (Retired), Burlington, Vermont, Police Department; and Rachel Jolly, Women's Program Coordinator, Vermont Works for Women, Winsooki, Vermont

Many police agencies have begun to target women and/or minorities specifically in their recruitment efforts. In spite of these heightened recruitment efforts, the wide range of job openings, and competitive compensation packages, the number of women entering protective services—and policing in particular—has not increased substantially over the past two decades.

According to *Equality Denied: The Status of Women in Policing, 2001*, a report by the National Center for Women and Policing, women accounted for only 12.7 percent of all sworn law enforcement positions in large agencies (those with 100 or more sworn personnel) in 2001—a figure that is less than four percentage points higher than in 1990, when women comprised 9 percent of all sworn officers. In small and rural agencies (those with fewer than 100 sworn personnel), women comprise an even smaller number—8.1 percent—of all sworn personnel. When those figures are combined in a weighted estimate, they indicate that women represent only 11.2 percent of all sworn law enforcement personnel in the United States—dramatically less than the participation of women in the whole labor force, estimated at 46.5 percent.¹

When more attention was first given to recruiting women, in the 1970s and 1980s (when popular television shows like *Cagney & Lacey* and *Hill Street Blues* portrayed women holding their own with male counterparts), there was a slight upsurge in female officers. Unfortunately, that increase has not been maintained. Jon Felperin, director of the Center for Law Enforcement Training, based in Northridge, California, notes that there is mounting evidence that the slow pace of increase in the representation of women in large police agencies has stalled or possibly reversed. In 2004, women still accounted for only 12.7 percent of law enforcement positions in large agencies, and now that number seems to be declining.²

One possible explanation for this stall, or even decline, in women's representation in sworn law enforcement ranks is the decrease in the number of consent decrees mandating the hiring of women and/or minorities. Among surveyed agencies noted in a 2003 report, eight consent decrees expired in the period from 1999 to 2002, yet only two consent decrees were implemented since 1995, and only six were implemented in the entire decade.³ Among municipal police departments, those with a consent decree had 77 percent more sworn women than those departments without a consent decree and 25 percent more than the national average for municipal police departments.⁴

In Vermont, several agencies came together in 2004 to improve the representation of women in the profession and saw immediate success. This article describes the reasons for and the implementation of this successful recruitment program.

Why Women?

Why should police departments specifically target women to fill these positions? Two compelling reasons are education and demographics. Women in the United States and Europe now account for 54 percent of college graduates. Additionally, U.S. women outpace their male counterparts in obtaining degrees (holding 58 percent of bachelor's degrees and 59 percent of graduate degrees).⁵ There is well-documented research that has shown a positive correlation between higher-educated people and their level of success in law enforcement positions that use such areas as critical thinking, problem solving, and better-developed interpersonal and communication skills.⁶ Since women make up 51 percent of the population, they constitute an untapped resource from which to recruit.

Further persuasive evidence can be found in a guidebook developed by the National Center for Women and Policing titled *Recruiting and Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement*.⁷ This guide offers seven well-researched and documented advantages to hiring and retaining female law enforcement officers. According to the report, the evidence is as follows:

- Female officers have proved to be as competent as their male counterparts. Research from departments in nine cities across the country indicates that women officers were equally as qualified as their male counterparts for patrol work.
- Female officers are less likely to use excessive force. In a study conducted by the Los Angeles Police Department, women were significantly less likely to be involved in employing either deadly or excessive force, resulting in fewer lawsuits and less negative publicity for their departments. Also noted was the fact that physical strength has *not* been shown to predict either general police effectiveness or the ability to handle dangerous situations successfully.
- Female officers can help implement community-oriented policing. Communication, problem solving, and cooperation with community members—hallmarks of community-style policing—are areas in which women officers receive better evaluations than their male counterparts.
- Employing more female officers will improve the law enforcement response to violence against women. Relationship violence calls are the single largest category of calls made to police across the country. Because most of the victims are women and most of the batterers men, it is important to have female officers on the force to be effective in responding to these calls.
- Female officers often have the ability to de-escalate potentially violent or aggressive situations through their presence and use of interpersonal skills, reducing the need to resort to physical confrontation.
- Increasing the presence of female officers reduces problems of sexual harassment and discrimination within an agency. Sexual harassment is more prevalent in male-dominated workplaces. Hiring and retaining more women reduces the numeric underrepresentation of female officers and, as a result, enhances the organizational climate.
- The presence of women can bring about beneficial changes in policy for all

officers. Management has an incentive to examine selection and training standards, measures of police performance, family-friendly policies that support both parents at the time of a birth or an adoption, uniform and equipment design, and supervision of all officers. A gender-diverse workplace makes a better workplace for all sworn personnel.

The New York State Police (NYSP) recently conducted a survey of young women to determine what would attract them to a law enforcement career. For women between the ages of 19 and 29, the NYSP found a demand for financial inducements and job security, a supportive work climate, skill and task variety, and family-friendly work policies.⁸ Policing can be a career that offers all of these things, and any department, with some minor system changes, can easily become the “department of choice” to attract and retain the best applicants. The chief advantage of incorporating these changes into the organizational system is that all members, regardless of gender, would benefit.

During extensive interviews with female law enforcement officers, staff at Vermont Works for Women (VWW; www.nnetw.org), an organization whose mission is to “help women and girls explore, pursue, and excel in nontraditional careers that pay a livable wage,” got to know women who loved their jobs. All stated that they liked the public service aspect of their jobs the most and that they enjoyed working to solve problems in their communities. They also spoke of the high degree of independence they enjoyed on a daily basis, of never getting bored, and of using many “tools” such as communication and problem solving to de-escalate potentially dangerous situations before they got out of control. Clearly, there is a need and a place for women in the law enforcement profession.

Establishment of the Program

Most police departments, however, struggle to attract and retain significant numbers of female law enforcement officers. This may have led Chief Gary Margolis of the University of Vermont Police Services to call VWW in 2003. For several weeks, Chief Margolis had driven past one of VWW’s training sites on his way to and from work. The site, a home renovation project, was an on-the-job training program with an all-female crew. “I’ve been watching your crew,” he said, “and I’ve been wondering if you could train women for careers in law enforcement in the same way that you train women for careers in construction.”

Ten months later, with the support of nine law enforcement agencies, the Vermont Department of Corrections, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Vermont Department of Labor, VWW launched Step Up to Law Enforcement, a nine-week preacademy training and introduction to real policing and corrections for women interested in pursuing careers in the law enforcement field. The program, which has now run for four years in northwest Vermont, has proved to be a particularly effective vehicle for attracting women to law enforcement careers in Chittenden County, Vermont. Since the program’s inception in 2004, there has been not only a significant increase in women applicants but also more women officers hired. This indicates that the program is reaching those qualified women who previously had not seen policing as a career option.

As a community-based organization, VWW is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between women in the community and area police departments. The organization has a 22-year track record of recruiting and preparing women for employment in nontraditional occupations. In consultation with its law enforcement colleagues, it has designed a program that prepares women not only for the physical challenges of the police academy and the law enforcement field but also for various stages of the officer selection process where female candidates have historically not performed well. This

partnership represents an opportunity for collaboration that is truly a win-win for community members and employers alike.

Program Structure

Step Up to Law Enforcement begins with meeting women where they are in their lives: in their varying degrees of physical fitness; expressing different levels of self-esteem; with their different barriers of financial, family, and emotional stresses; and at different stages of certainty about where or how they want to serve. The program asks participants to come with a strong desire to serve their communities and the readiness to work hard every day toward fitness and academic goals that will make their future careers possible.

The program has three key components: physical conditioning geared to the physical exam administered by the police academy and taught by licensed trainers at a local gym; women's resources, or the soft skills of career planning and the law enforcement profession, a module taught by the program coordinator and contracted instructors; and training in classroom and technical topics specific to the profession, taught by policing and corrections partners.

There are several other important elements of the Step Up program:

- Preparation for the physical test(s) that must be passed by all police and/or corrections academy candidates in the state or jurisdiction
- Preparation for the written exam(s) required for entry to the police and/or corrections academies
- Awareness of and preparation for the application process, which may include oral board interviews, a psychological profile, a polygraph test, a background investigation, and report writing
- An introduction to relevant issues in criminal justice
- Presentations, interactive workshops, and panel discussions with law enforcement officers on a wide range of policing and corrections topics
- Hands-on technical training in firearms and physical response techniques
- A personal development module that focuses on building self-esteem, developing skills in effective communication, goal setting, and problem solving
- Employment planning and job-seeking skills, including cover letter and résumé development, interview preparedness, networking, and public speaking
- Professional mentoring and other forms of postprogram support

While in the program, participants are exposed to anywhere from 40 to 60 law enforcement professionals, most of whom are women, who teach a variety of topics. Participants are certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid and are given instruction in basic self-defense. The program includes guided tours of regional correctional facilities as well as the Vermont Police Academy in Pittsford. All participants take the police academy's written aptitude test, and passing scores are kept on permanent file.

Benefits to Program Participation

The camaraderie and the support that students experience within the program also help to boost their sense of self-confidence tremendously, making the job application process easier and the women more successful. One recent graduate remarked, "When I started this program, I couldn't do one pushup without fears of falling face first into the carpet, and I hated running. . . . But here I am now doing 20 push-ups and running a mile and a half with ease. I have so much confidence and self-esteem that I feel like I'm unstoppable, and I look in the mirror and can't help but smile. I'm almost halfway there on the road to my goal, and I see nothing but green lights."

Another student, Erica, came to the program after a career assessment suggested that policing, a career she had never considered before that point, held great potential for her. Through the nine weeks of the course, Erica's confidence and self-awareness grew to the point that she was sure that policing was the right career for her. Upon completion of the program, she applied to, and was hired by, one of the most competitive police departments in the state. In May 2008, Erica graduated from the Vermont Police Academy. She is now serving as a police officer with the Burlington Police Department.

Another benefit of the program is exposing women to the realities of the profession so that they understand what police work genuinely entails. This opportunity decreases the effect of myths created by the entertainment industry that tend to create false expectations. This prehire experience can have an impact on retention and ultimately saves police departments and the Vermont Department of Corrections money. Recruits are more likely to stick with the career after learning more specifically what the job involves. As one participant put it, "When I was little, I always thought I wanted to [be a police officer]. But now, since I've had the experience and I've been able to shadow and speak to some of the officers, now I know this is truly what I really want to do."

Results

In the four years of the program, 20 of the 34 graduates have been hired by either police departments or state correctional facilities. Several from the most recent class are either still in the preparatory phases of applying (working on their physical or written exam eligibility, for instance) or in the midst of their application processes. Their stories shed light on the kinds of barriers that likely prevent other women like them from ever getting to the door of the recruitment office.

A 2006 graduate, a 36-year-old single mother of two, commuted over 70 minutes each way to attend the program four days a week while juggling child care and another job. Although she once served in the military police, years had separated her from the physical and mental demands of the job, and she felt she needed the team support and professional exposure of the program to reenter the field with confidence. She graduated from the Step Up to Law Enforcement program, was hired by a state correctional facility, and has found success not only as an officer but as a certified Department of Corrections academy trainer.

Perhaps the words of a 2005 graduate, Officer Mandy Wooster of the University of Vermont Police Services, describe the power of the program best: "Through this program I have become more confident in my abilities than ever before. Without this program I may have never pursued this career path. The program pushed me to reach my goals. The support that I have received, and continue to receive from VWW, has been phenomenal."

Conclusion

The Step Up to Law Enforcement program is a recruitment strategy, a skill-building

resource, and an intensive experiential opportunity, as well as a gender-specific job-training program. Step Up to Law Enforcement is helping to fill gaps and diversify the forces of protective services in Vermont.

For more information about Vermont Works for Women's Step Up to Law Enforcement (including a 10-minute video about the program), and how to replicate the program in other communities, readers can either visit the VWW Web site at www.vtworksforwomen.org or call the organization at 802-655-8900. ■

Lianne M. Tuomey, MSW, has 27 years of varied police experience in both municipal and university policing. A member of the IACP's Diversity Coordinating Panel and its Patrol and Tactical Operations Committee, she is an active participant in the IACP's Division of State Associations of Chiefs of Police's SafeShield project. Chief Tuomey is also a recipient of the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives (NAWLEE)—Motorola Woman Law Enforcement Executive of the Year award.

Rachel Jolly has been working in the field of experiential education for over 12 years. At Vermont Works for Women, she helps to develop, recruit for, and teach a variety of women's programs, including Step Up to Law Enforcement. She holds a bachelor of science from the University of Vermont and a master of education from Rhodes University in South Africa.

Notes:

¹National Center for Women and Policing, *Equality Denied: Status of Women in Policing*, 2001, April 2002, 2, http://www.womenandpolicing.org/PDF/2002_Status_Report.pdf (accessed April 7, 2009).

²Jon Felperin, "Women In Law Enforcement: Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back," May 18, 2004, <http://www.policeone.com/writers/columnists/JonFelperin/articles/87017/> (accessed April 7, 2009).

³National Center for Women and Policing, *Equality Denied*, 5.

⁴National Center for Women and Policing, *Under Scrutiny: The Effect of Consent Decrees on the Representation of Women in Sworn Law Enforcement*, Spring 2003, 3, <http://www.womenandpolicing.org/pdf/Fullconsentdecreestudy.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2009).

⁵Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland, *Why Women Mean Business: Understanding the Emergence of Our Next Economic Revolution* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2008), 30–31.

⁶Louis Mayo, ed., "College Education and Policing," *The Police Chief* 73, no. 8 (August 2006): 20–38.

⁷National Center for Women and Policing, *Recruiting and Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement*, 2001, 22–27, <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/bja/185235.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2009).

[8](#)Ibid., 47.

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