



New Chief of a Small Agency – Now What?

By Chief Dean Stiegemeier

You are appointed the Chief of Police for a small police agency. Now what?

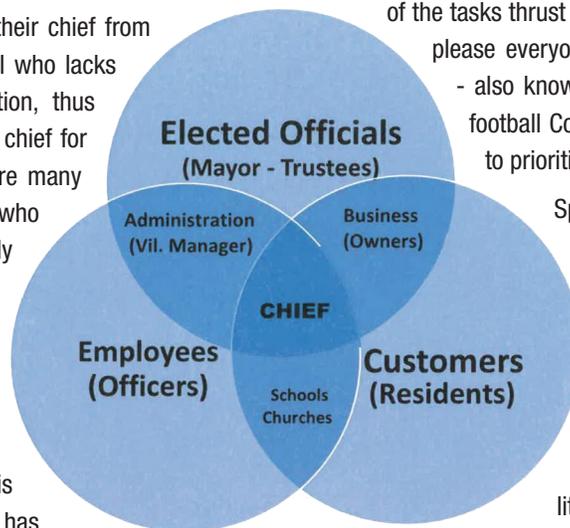
The Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police has recently undertaken the task of trying to define what a small police agency is. Is it a department with less than 10 officers, 20 officers, 30 officers? Realistically, it doesn't matter what the definition is, as the chief is the one who sets the tone for those working under his/her direction, no matter what the size.

Many small police departments promote their chief from within, sometimes promoting an individual who lacks experience, training, or a formal education, thus potentially setting up the newly appointed chief for failure. Now don't get me wrong; there are many newly appointed, small agency chiefs who are outstanding. These chiefs unusually possess compassion, charisma and the drive to learn the rigors of leading a small department.

Other small communities recruit or hire from the outside, advertising the position with specific qualifications in mind. This often results in the hiring of a person who has prior leadership or command experience, either as a prior chief or as command officer from another department. Small municipalities are often strapped for funding; hence the compensation package for this position makes it virtually impossible for anyone other than a retiree (currently collecting a pension) to apply and survive.

As a Police Chief for a small agency, one quickly learns that there are not enough hours in the day to get everything accomplished that: 1). You want to get done, 2). That needs to be done, 3). That is asked to be done. I liken this to a Venn diagram (see figure). The chief is accountable, responsible and reports to everyone - smack dab in the middle.

Being a chief for a small agency is similar to performing triage in an emergency room. There is not enough time in the day to complete all of the tasks thrust upon you. You will burn yourself out trying to please everyone. You must decide What's Important Now - also known as W.I.N., (an acronym from Notre Dame football Coach Lou Holtz), thus allowing you the ability to prioritize your mission.



Speaking of your mission: New chiefs need to review and update your department policies, rules and regulations. This is going to save you, your officers and your municipality should there ever be a situation where a question of following proper police procedures is brought into play. Without updated documentation, you are ripe for litigation.

As a chief of a small agency, you are looked upon as the resident expert on almost everything, be it the vehicle code, zoning code, building code, or village code, not to mention civil and criminal codes - you are unquestionably the go-to resource. By knowing your community, including the residents, community groups, clergy and business leaders, in discussions of topics that directly affect them, you



will often be able to head off a problem prior to it becoming a problem. It is imperative that you do your due diligence and address quality of life issues in a timely manner. If not, things will quickly erupt into a community uproar on Facebook or a multitude of other social media outlets.

In several small communities, social media seems to be replacing a call to the police. In lieu of calling the police or using 911, many residents are now posting their crimes, concerns, or complaints about/against the police on Facebook or Twitter. This entitles police detractors the ability to "comment below." Some of the responses can be quite venomous, most often without merit. It is a double-edged sword if you choose to view or ignore this phenomenon, as it will consume and infuriate you, but might also be the source of some great community information/outreach/intelligence.

I will reiterate that if you are the chief of a small agency

it is imperative that you know your community. It's an old adage but it's true: Be as open and transparent as you can possibly be. Be visible in the community. Residents like to see a squad patrolling their neighborhoods. Get out of the office and walk around the neighborhoods. Residents like to see the uniform in their neighborhood. Walk the business district, eat lunch at various establishments, try to attend neighborhood meetings. If your village holds annual events, set up a booth with fun safety-related items for the kids and information for the adults. Every contact you make just might elicit needed support for your department.

As is the case in every community, the political pressures thrust upon you can be overwhelming. It is of great value to have leadership/command experience coupled with confidence and a little finesse when addressing complaints brought forth by elected officials. Often the elected officials are simply unaware of the limits/responsibilities of law

enforcement. As with the general population, much of what they know (or think they know) is garnered from television. Many of the tasks we are asked to perform are merely quality of life concerns. We truly are the gatekeepers, be it opening their local park in the morning and closing it at night, crossing children in the school zone, following school buses, delivering packages - meals, assisting the elderly from a fall, opening locked vehicles, chasing wild/domestic animals, removing tree limbs,

retrieving garbage cans, helping Public Works, the Village Clerk, and yes, even assisting the Fire Department are but a few of the duties a small police agency performs every day. We might consider them mundane, but each one is personally important to someone else in the community.

Budgeting constraints are what drives the bus. Knowing your monetary limitations, coupled with experience in public speaking, will aid your ability to present new

concepts or requests for new equipment to a city council or village board. If your confidence is not perceived by the governing body, your request will likely be viewed with much skepticism and in all likelihood denied. It goes without saying that doing your homework greatly enhances the probability of receiving a positive outcome. Provide documentation including statistics and even thank you notes to back up your request, hence leaving little room for discussion. Be realistic, though. Elected officials are the keepers of the village purse strings. Most municipal budgets experienced drastic cutbacks over the past decade. Rightfully so, board members take a very dim view on purchasing frivolous things.

As the head of a small police agency, you will be tasked with several inevitable obstacles, one of which is the hiring and retention of your officers. Part-time officers are the life blood of small agencies. Several small agencies supplement their full-time regiment with part-time



As part of his Board of Officers duties, ILACP Vice President Dean Stiegemeier, right, presents a Certified Eligible plaque to Commander CJ Incrocci of the Carol Stream Police Department on February 18, 2020.



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officers. Some agencies are only staffed with part-time officers. As the Police Chief, you are responsible and accountable for hiring and retention of quality officers. It is imperative that a thorough background investigation is conducted on a new applicant. Several articles have been recently written concerning “gypsy officers” or officers who jump from one agency to another after becoming involved in an internal investigation just prior to termination or resignation. You will be doing your organization a great disservice, as well as placing them at great risk for potential lawsuits, if you fail to thoroughly vet new applicants.

Once hired - get them trained. Training above and beyond the mandated training for the ILETSB is important. Your local MTUs provide wonderful training opportunities, as does the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police, some of which is either no cost or minimal cost for small agencies. Check the ILACP website for the training calendar. This will further the professionalism of your officers and your department.

Retention is a huge issue with all police departments, but especially among small police agencies. Neighboring communities paying more – different life choices – negative public image - are but a few detractors part-time officers are confronted with. Neighboring departments poaching officers away from their home departments is of great concern for small agencies. However, it is very difficult to argue with an officer leaving to better themselves. Usually absent of a collective bargaining agreement, part-time officers should be a piece of cake to lead... well, not exactly. Part-time officers bring with them a cadre of

issues from conflicts with their full-time employment, to their inability to work certain hours/days or just wanting to carry a badge. If you are fair and try to provide for some comfort needs – training, competitive compensation, and a reasonable response to requested time off, you will hopefully succeed in retaining the officers.

One last comment on politics and small agency policing: Depending on what article you read – be it online or a peer reviewed professional journal – the average career expectancy for a Police Chief is three to four years. Which, coincidentally or not, coincides with the political election cycle. It is unrealistic to please everyone or even attempt to please everyone. You must be constantly aware of your political surroundings. Be the professional that you are. Do your job to the best of your ability. Be proud of your accomplishments and do not take things personally. ■



Dean Stiegemeier is Chief of Police in Maple Park, Illinois, and is Vice President at-Large for Region 2 of the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police. He spent many years (and ranks) in the Carpentersville Police Department and also served as chief in South Beloit. He has a master's degree in organizational leadership from Judson University.

2020 Annual Conference Canceled; Watch for news of rescheduled Awards Banquet

Due to restrictions placed on the number of people allowed to gather in one place due to the coronavirus, the Board of Officers decided March 18, 2020, to cancel this year's conference scheduled for April 29-May 1 in Oak Brook.

But the Awards Banquet is being rescheduled, probably in August. Watch the Weekly Bulletin and website for more information.