

Death of Rural Police Departments Threaten the Security of Their Small Towns

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Abstract

Rural police departments have the same legal and operational obligations as those in urban areas, but far fewer resources due to their smaller tax base. Lack of resources can cause these small departments to be disbanded and the town contracts with the county sheriff's office for law enforcement services, which provide fewer services and longer response times. Based on a case study of a small town police department, this research suggests that small town police chiefs must be politically astute in creating and utilizing a variety of strategies to support and maintain their departments, find supplementary funding sources, and promote a positive, cohesive work environment to encourage job satisfaction and reduce turnover.

Keywords: Rural police departments, rural law enforcement, police management, rural police department funding, preserving rural police departments

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Introduction

Small towns gain safety and security benefits when they have their own police department, but at great expense, so they face many challenges in maintaining their police departments. Even the smallest police departments require a large portion of a rural town's budget. The smaller the town, the lower the tax base, so the less funding is available to provide all town services. The police department competes with all other town departments for funding. If the police department receives a budget increase to buy a new car, for example, there may not be enough money that year to fix potholes or replace burned out street lights.

All police departments in a state are required to meet the same standards, have the same training, and are obligated to have minimum equipment to perform their duties, no matter the department's size. Like metropolitan departments, rural police departments must provide the personal equipment officers need to do their job, such as uniforms, belts, and guns. They must also have an office, patrol cars, evidence collection equipment, and evidence storage facilities, like all other departments. All of this is expensive to maintain.

When a small town decides they can no longer afford their police department, it is disbanded. Once a police department is disbanded, it won't be reinstated, as it is very expensive to create a police department. With no police department, the town will contract with the local county sheriff's office to provide law enforcement services. This is less expensive, but doesn't provide the same level of safety and security. Sheriff's deputies will drive through the town each shift every day, but they probably won't be there when there when an emergency happens as they will be patrolling in the county or tied up with another call for service. No deputy will be assigned full time to the town.

Data collected for an organizational assessment of a rural police department in the State of Virginia, USA, was conducted over a three month period in fall 2016 revealed a great deal about the challenges of maintaining a small town police department. This research provides an understanding of how the subject agency runs its day-to-day operations and its ability to accomplish organizational goals. The subject department has ten full time employees; one chief, one sergeant, two corporals, one investigator, four patrol officers and one office assistant. The population of the town is approximately 2,288 over 1.4 square miles (United States Census Bureau). This research addresses departmental changes that have occurred since 2009, when the current chief was promoted from lieutenant. The organizational assessment of this police department revealed that the police chief has many constraints on his budget, but also is very politically and financially innovative in stretching his budget and finding outside funding to support his department and his officers.

Research Design

Organizational assessment factors applicable to police departments used to analyze the subject rural police department were chosen based on published research (Burnet, 2015; Crank & Langworthy, 1992; Chambers, 2001; Galliher, Donovan, & Adams, 1975; Payne et al., 2005; Robbins & Judge, 2016; Sims, Ruiz, Weaver, & Harvey, 2005). Organizational factors used were: work specialization, departmentalization, chain of command, span of control, centralization/decentralization, organizational size, employee diversity, organizational goals, rate of internal organizational change, rate of external organizational change, organizational structure, organizational culture, employee group cohesiveness, employee training opportunities, employee absentee rate, employee turnover rate, and hiring process formality. Each factor was defined and measured throughout the data collection process to assess the organization according to accepted organizational assessment theory (Robbins & Judge, 2016; Morgan, 2006).

Data Collection

The data for this assessment was collected from the subject police department over approximately three months from police department documents beginning when the current chief was appointed (2009-2016). The information collected was aggregate data found in the policies and procedures on file in the department. No data from interviews of the officers or other employees of the department were included in the data. If information was offered voluntarily by any member of the department, not the result of questioning nor an expression of an opinion, these data were included.

Assessment Factors and Findings

Work specialization

This factor explains the key job tasks of individuals who work within the department that must be completed while on duty each day, if applicable circumstances arise. The department's work specialization was found to be low. All officers handle tasks appropriate to their rank and position within the department, but are cross trained to accomplish all law enforcement tasks. The exception is the chief, who is cross trained in all law enforcement tasks, but is the only officer who plans programs, directs all officers, evaluates department operations, develops an annual budget proposal, controls budgeted expenses, attends city council meetings, and serves on committees and boards of agencies related to promoting crime prevention and improving law enforcement, among other duties. The chief fills in on patrol when needed and does backup as necessary. Other officers have numerous job requirements due to the small size of the department, but are still able to effectively execute them. The administrative assistance is more than a secretary. She also does tasks that require her to go to training, which relieves officers from some tasks they would do in a larger department. The chief takes on a number of tasks that in a larger department a subordinate officer would be assigned.

Departmentalization

This department was found to be departmentalized appropriate to the size of the organization (Brunett, 2015). Employees have separate duties assigned, but it is common to find different positions with similar activities. The positions are differentiated by the degree to which job duties are performed and the level of responsibility. Higher ranks have greater responsibilities. Few job functions can be grouped together due to the small number of employees.

Chain of command

This variable reveals the authority and the unity of command that occurs within the police department and assesses whether it is weak or strong. The department does not follow the guidelines for the chain of command as described in the policies and procedures. Based on information volunteered by multiple members of the police department, all officers are encouraged to go straight to the chief for any problematic situations, without following the chain of command, whether he is present in the building or reached by telephone. While the lower ranking officers are aware that they are under the supervision of anyone with a higher rank than their own, the chain of command within the police department is weak, because all the members of the department go to the chief for any questions.

Span of control

Span of control focuses on whether or not the chief can effectively and efficiently supervise the number of employees at the department. The span of control for this department is very narrow. Due to the small size of the department, the chief is able to maintain direct contact with all his officers and make sure all his employees understand their orders and how they are to be executed (Dias and Vaughn, 2006). The chief is able to supervise all nine of his employees, influence each officer on an individual level, and create strong relationships with his employees.

Centralization and decentralization

A department is said to be decentralized when the lowest-level managers are in charge of decision-making processes, as well as, implementation processes (Robbins & Judge, 2016, p. 254). The structure of this department is as equally centralized as it is decentralized. The department is centralized in that the department's policies list and define who is responsible for making executive decisions while on duty. While centralized, the department is decentralized in the implementation of the departmental policies and procedures. There are many occasions when lower ranked officers on the scene of an accident or crime are in charge of making important decisions due to their specialized training in an area that a higher-ranked officer does not have. Sims, et al (2005) found that rural police departments are likely to be more relaxed and, thus, decentralized, as is the subject department.

Organizational size

When measuring organizational size, a department is considered small when there are twenty or fewer full time employees. The organizational size of this department is small since it has less than twenty-employees. There are ten full time employees; one chief, one sergeant, two corporals, one investigator, and four patrol officers and one office assistant. The size has been consistent over the last eight years.

Employee diversity

This study examines surface-level diversity, which is defined as diversity demographics, which include age, gender, race, and years of experience before joining the department (Robin & Judge, 2016). The department is in the middle diversity level, between a low and high diversity rate. The mean age of officers within the department is thirty-four. This department has had a total of sixteen males, one female officer, and one female administrative assistant over course of the past eight years. Fifteen of the sixteen men were white, one male was African American, and the two females were white. Seven employees, including the administrative assistant, had no prior experiences, two employees had between six months to two years' experience, two employees had between three and five years, and seven employees had more than six years of prior experience.

Diversity in this department has been consistent over the past eight years, probably due to the characteristics of the rural area and its distance from a large metropolitan area. The population of this town is predominately white, which is reflected in the number of white employees at the police department. Police applicants from the community typically are older, meaning there is a greater likelihood they have previous police training and years of experience. This is helpful to the department since they cannot afford to send any new employees to the police academy for initial training and is reflected in employees' years of prior experience.

Organizational formality

Formality is the degree to which jobs in an organization are standardized and the policies and procedures that govern the behaviors of employees in each job position (Robbins & Judge, 2016, p. 254). This police department was found to have a high degree of formality, with detailed policies and procedures employees must follow that dictate responsibilities, task duties, and meeting the public's expectations. These policies allow employees to know what is expected of them in legal issues and in times of crisis, and professionally establish what is expected of the employees when an issue or conflict surfaces and details how to deescalate the problem.

Organizational goals

Clear set organizational goals encourage employees to be motivated, productive, and satisfied with their jobs (Jung, 2014). Goals typically focus on the intentions for

operating the organization and its overall philosophy. This department was found to have a very specific set of organizational goals and clear mission statement that all employees are obligated to uphold: serving and protecting the community (Morgan, 2012). The goals of the mission statement are fully embedded in the employees' daily tasks and duties, making the organizational culture strong. The Chief of Police ensures that his employees abide by the norms established within the mission statement.

This police department's mission statement was compared to the mission statements of two rural police departments of similar size (Town of Boone, 2016; Town of Chincoteague, 2016). The subject department's mission statement shared common themes with the other two in holding their officers and employees to a high standard to ensure quality protection of the community and to provide their officers with appropriate resources to effectively do so.

Rate of internal and external organizational change

Two types of change are examined here: internal and external change over the period studied. Internal change occurs within an organization and affects the policies and procedures of the organization, itself. External change occurs within an organization due to forces from outside of the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2016, p. 285).

The rate of internal organizational change has been relatively slow within this department over the eight years studied. Although some departmental policies and procedures have changed over the last eight years, few other changes were made. When the Chief was appointed to that office, he created a list of potential changes that he hoped to implement during his time as chief. None of these changes have been implemented thus far due to lack of interest from employees.

Along with the rate of internal change, the rate of external organizational change was slow within this police department, and policies and procedures have remained constant over many years. Two policies and procedures have changed over the eight years studied due to external forces. One policy was enacted by the Virginia State Legislature to establish guidelines for traffic stops, investigative stopping of vehicles, and road check procedures. The second policy also was implemented by the state in regard to eyewitness identification procedures. Another change caused by an outside organization is the yearly budget for the police department. The Town Council, with assistance from the Chief of Police, votes on and sets an annual budget determined by city funds that can be allocated to the department and what resources the department needs each year.

Organizational structure

The organizational structure of the police department represents the communication process and hierarchy of command that the department follows. Overall, the department's organizational structure is a simple structure. This simple structure gives the department the ability to be fast, flexible, inexpensive to operate, and have clear accountability to supervisors (Robbins & Judge, 2016, p. 255). The official organizational chart shows the

chief is the head of the department and each of his subordinates must report to him through the chain of command. According to the organizational chart, patrol officers report to one of the corporals, corporals report to the sergeant, and the sergeant reports to the chief. Due to the small size of this department and the chief's preference, officers usually report to the chief instead of going through the chain of command.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture is developed over years and is rooted in values shared throughout the organization. These values set the organization apart from other organizations and give the organization a sense of identity (Robbins & Judge, 2016). Low organizational culture means the culture has a negative effect on organizational goals, and a high culture has a positive effect on organizational goals. This department blends high and low organizational cultures. The formal policies outlining employee conduct suggest high organizational culture, but the informal nature of this department suggests a low organizational culture, which does not appear to negatively affect organizational goals. The low organizational culture can be seen when some senior officers have refused to complete training requested by the chief. Within informal departments, it is not uncommon for officers to view each other as co-equals (Falcone, Wells & Weisheit, 2002). Another example of this informal dynamic is the unwillingness of some officers to travel and attend training outside of the local commuting area. There are no negative repercussions if employees elect not to attend trainings. However, the data analysis shows high group cohesiveness, which reflects positively on the department's ability to support and meet their organizational goals.

The chief uses various strategies to promote group cohesiveness and employee satisfaction and stretch his constrained budget. In a department that has not seen pay raises in ten years, the chief is able to supplement his officers' pay a little. The state pays the department mileage to transport mentally ill individuals to treatment facilities, which can be hours away. Instead of adding these funds to the department's budget, the chief gives the money to the officer who transported the mentally ill person. One officer is assigned full time to the regional drug task force, so the state pays this officer's salary and benefits. This officer isn't away on task force business all the time. When she isn't, the officer performs her regular duties in the department, so the department has a free officer. Small things, that larger police departments would never do, help the department's budget. They never buy new police cars, and were thrilled recently when they are able to buy a four year old police car. One of the officers is also a mechanic and services the department's cars and does all but very major repairs.

Communication process

Formal communication channels are established by the organization, while informal communication channels are established by the members and employees of the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2016). This factor was assessed based on the organizational structure of the department and volunteered information about communication processes. This department uses a very informal communication process.

The Chief maintains an open door policy and it is common for officers to approach him directly. The same system is used when the Chief communicates to his subordinates. This communication method flows informally in all directions and through multiple department levels. Robins and Judge (2016) describe this as an all-channels method, which has a high level of speed and member satisfaction, with a moderate level of accuracy. The all channels communication method is most effective when all members are able to contribute freely and no one person take a leadership, which has been demonstrated in the cross training and multiple tasks each officer performs.

Employee group cohesiveness

Low or high level of employee group cohesiveness effects how well an organization is able to achieve its goals over time. The employee group cohesiveness of this department was found to be very high, due to the size of the department and the likelihood of close relationships developing. Department policies and procedures detail expectations of how employees should act and conduct themselves within the department and out in the field. Based on information volunteered by members of the department, there are strong relationships among the employees and a high level of camaraderie. Research shows that smaller departments tend to be more cohesive compared to larger departments (Robbins & Judge, 2016, p. 151). Information voluntarily provided indicates there is a high level of trust within the department, and thus a high level of employee group cohesiveness.

Management feedback to employees

Management feedback to employees is measured as high or low, with low representing little or no formalized performance feedback for employees and high a formal and scheduled management feedback process. In addition, policies regarding disciplinary procedures and internal investigations indicate high or low management feedback formality. There is no formal feedback in this department; all feedback given by the Chief to subordinates is informal in nature and on an irregular basis. There has not been a formal performance evaluation process in place at the department in over fifteen years. The reasoning is that without pay incentives associated with positive evaluations performance evaluations are unnecessary. Formal performance evaluations are limited to disciplinary actions and internal investigations, which are set out in department policies.

Employee training opportunities

All police departments in a state, no matter their size, have the same legal and operational requirements. New officers must complete the police academy as their basic training requirement, which can last as long as six months, depending on the state, six months that the officer is paid but not working in the department. Each department pays for the training academy. Every two years all officers must take continuing education courses paid for by each department. When officers are at the training courses they are not working in their departments and their shifts must be covered by the other officers. Employees can receive training to improve their skill sets as an officer, or be trained to be an instructor to train others (Lee, McNamara, Pitt-Catsoupes, & Lee, 2014, p. 205).

These programs are designed to supplement the basic recruit, refresher, advanced, and specialist training offered in local police academies. This department provides in-service trainings to all employees, including the administrative assistant. The in-service trainings are offered at a local criminal justice training academy. Some officers attend training in other state locations. Training opportunities meet or exceed state requirements.

Employee absentee rate

The department accrued 133 absences from 2009-2016. These numbers account for both full shift and partial shift absences. Twenty-one of these are attributed to major medical procedures or injuries. Partial missed shifts accounted for the highest number at fifty total absences. Employees are allowed up to two hours for wellness visits to family doctors. Officers can switch and trade shifts to cover sick days, or other excusable absences. Although twenty-one of the absences in these data can be explained through surgeries or other noted medical procedures, there was little to indicate that employees were missing days to purposefully avoid work as few of the unexplained days coincided with weekends, or days off. Robbins and Judge (2016) suggest a moderate to weak negative relationship between absenteeism and job satisfaction. These data suggest a moderate to high level of job satisfaction, as employees are not leaving for other employment.

Employee turnover rate

Turnover rates are important in understanding employee job satisfaction, because employee turnover has a stronger relationship to job satisfaction than absenteeism (Robbins & Judge, 2016). Turnover rates were measured by aggregate data from the department based on employee histories. Turnover rates were found to be relatively low. Since 2009, ten officers have left the department either through resignation, termination, or retirement. Of these, two retired, four resigned from law enforcement entirely, three left for a larger agency, but returned a few years later. Since 2009, the department has hired ten officers and four are still with the agency.

Hiring process formality

The police department's hiring process includes the recruitment process, background investigation, writing sample, formal interviews, and other strategies used prior to hiring a new police officer and is rated as highly formal, because every step of the process is carried out as listed in departmental policies and procedures. An extensive background investigation is conducted for all applicants, including the applicant's employment history, neighborhood and personal reference check, criminal incident/ arrest history, and any court records. The most qualified applicants receive a formal interview with the chief and sergeant(s). The hiring process takes two to three months before the interview process begins.

In eight years, the department has not altered the hiring process. The chief seeks to hire candidates who have already completed the academy training, eliminating the need for expensive tests such as polygraphs, psychological examinations, physical tests, and six

months away from the department to attend the police training academy. Thus, he hires those who have been officers in other departments and resigned or were let go. The chief is very careful when hiring to make sure an individual is a good fit in his department and also not a bad officer who was previously fired for significant reasons. Only one person terminated for cause during the research period.

Conclusion

The Chief of Police in this small, rural southeastern United States agency has accomplished many of his goals during his tenure as department leader and has demonstrated innovation politically and financially in maintaining his department. The department effectively meets the state requirements, as well as, the town's required codes. The town is small and in a rural area so the police department is small. The smallness of the town and its associated small tax base provide the police department with a very restricted budget. However, the constrained budget has not prevented the department from meeting state and town requirements and accomplishing its law enforcement duties and organizational goals.

The chief supervises all employees efficiently and uses effective leadership styles to protect and serve the community. The smallness of the department helps maintain strong group cohesiveness and a resulting low employee turnover. Low turnover reduces strain on the department's budget, because the hiring process and overtime pay to fill in missing shifts is expensive. All police department members wear "many hats" that sometimes overlap, but each officer has certain tasks they must successfully accomplish. This variety encourages employee satisfaction even without pay raises for many years. The chief does provide random small amounts of money to officers who drive mentally ill citizens to treatment centers rather than adding these funds to the department's budget. Thus, we see that for a small town police department to survive, the chief has to be politically astute and innovative in finding external funding and motivating employees. The department's officers must be willing to work for low pay without raises, even cost of living raises, unless they are promoted. Hiring officers who are a good fit for the department, who want to be police officers in a rural small town, who understand the working conditions, go a long way toward reducing turnover and protecting the department's budget. The chief and his officers have demonstrated their commitment to preserving their department and this small town's safety and security.

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