

# RECRUITING AND RETAINING WOMEN POLICE OFFICERS — THE MESSAGE YOUR ORGANIZATION SENDS MATTERS

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With 25 years of experience in a state police organization, the last 11 of which I have served as a commander, I have witnessed our department's struggles with recruiting and retaining women in sworn law enforcement positions. This issue has a greater impact on state organizations than their county and municipal counterparts. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics,<sup>1</sup> the national average for sworn women police officers in county and city departments is approximately 13%, while state police organizations struggle to maintain half that number. Police agencies have made little progress in increasing this number since the mid-1980s, especially regarding women in command positions.<sup>2</sup>

Multiple studies since the 1970s have found that diverse and representative police forces are more effective and beneficial for the communities they serve.<sup>3</sup> Given the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within law enforcement, the task of rectifying this identified problem has fallen mainly on

their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Nearly every agency has faced significant challenges in addressing this issue, and all agencies have much work to do before their departments fully reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. The fact that progress may be slowing when it comes to diversifying law enforcement adds to the severity of the issue.<sup>5</sup>

Several explanations address the dearth of women in law enforcement. Although their male counterparts are doing the same jobs, women are often called to the profession for a variety of different personal and professional reasons than men.<sup>6</sup> For example, although both men and women value job security, women prioritize a supportive work climate, job enrichment, family-friendly work policies, choice of work assignment, and social contribution.<sup>7</sup> Generational differences create an additional hurdle between command staff personnel and the young women they are attempting to recruit to their departments.<sup>8</sup> If women are not involved in crafting messaging to recruit female officers, this distinction is likely to be lost and that message less effective.

Recruiting women for positions in law enforcement is only one side of the problem. Retention also proves difficult among women officers. Anecdotally, it is thought that women leave policing due to challenges with work-life balance, underrepresentation, and leadership.<sup>9</sup> Rigorous evaluations are needed to determine the accuracy of these assumptions. Appreciating the unique skills female officers can bring to the job (for example, female officers' increased effectiveness in de-escalating incidents compared to their male counterparts) is the first step in welcoming them into a profession where they are vastly underrepresented. The next step is to make them feel like a valued and important member of the team. Creating a formalized leadership/mentoring program for underrepresented women police officers is one way that many departments are currently attempting to address these issues. Education about the benefits of diversity in policing, systematic internal assessments of why women are leaving departments,<sup>10</sup> conversations with patrol staff about causes of the problem, creation of policies that enable women to balance work and family life, and promotion of women into positions of leadership may also increase retention among women officers. When these steps are skipped, law enforcement command staff are left scratching their heads as to why women may not wish to stay with their organizations. However, when these steps are followed accurately, both officers and the department as a whole benefit greatly from the inclusion and participation of women officers.

In order to significantly increase the number of women in law enforcement throughout the nation, I believe departments must select people — both recruiters and mentors — who understand those we seek to employ. They should work to identify women in their departments, empower them to create the recruiting message, and help them create a culture that embraces their differences and the values they bring to their departments and law enforcement as a whole. Providing women with the necessary resources — and allowing them the latitude to set up specialized recruiting, mentoring, and leadership training for incumbent officers and new recruits — will begin to create a culture that leads to an increase in the number of female officers in a measurable way.

It will take a concerted effort by command staff across organizations to achieve this goal, but a number of studies have shown that making our police forces more demographically representative of the populations they

serve may provide numerous benefits.<sup>11</sup> I challenge anyone who reads this paper to redouble your efforts and empower the appropriate personnel with the resources to accomplish this mission.

## Notes

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9. Judie G. Wexler and D.D. Logan, "Sources of Stress Among Women Police Officers," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 11 no. 1 (1983): 46-53.

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10. John A. Shjarback and Natalie Todak, "The Prevalence of Female Representation in Supervisory and Management Positions in American Law Enforcement: An Examination of Organizational Correlates," *Women and Criminal Justice* 29 no. 3 (2019): 129-147.
11. Grennan, "Findings on the Role of Officer Gender in Violent Encounters with Citizens"; Garrison, Grant, and McCormick, "Utilization of Police Women"; and Lonsway, *Hiring & Retaining More Women: The Advantages to Law Enforcement Agencies*.

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