

Engaging Volunteers in Your Law Enforcement Agency:

The Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program

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In the days after the events of September 11, 2001, as Americans recovered from their shock and disbelief, many were overcome by a desire to help. Federal, local, and state officials recognized this surge of volunteerism and on January 29, 2002, in his State of the Union Address, former President George W. Bush announced a call to all Americans to donate 4,000 hours or the equivalent of two years of their lives to service.

From this, the Citizen Corps Program specifically was developed to help coordinate volunteer activities and to increase the capacity of American communities to respond to any emergency situation. The program's goal is to provide opportunities for people to participate in a range of measures to make their families, their homes, and their communities safer from the threats of crime, terrorism, and disasters of all kinds. Five programs were brought together under the Citizen Corps umbrella to help achieve this goal: USAonWatch Neighborhood Watch, Medical Reserve Corps, Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), Fire Corps, and the Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program.

The VIPS Program was officially launched on May 30, 2002, with a website, www.policevolunteers.org, as its foundation. The Volunteers in Police Service program is managed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police and is funded through the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The original objectives of the program were to create a database of law enforcement agencies currently using volunteers; provide best practice resources and technical assistance to agencies to increase the use of volunteers; to produce resources and systems that agencies can implement into volunteer programs with ease; and to measure the impact of the VIPS Program and its value to the law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. The database of volunteer programs was live when the Web site launched with 76 agencies included. That number grew to 425 within the first year.

When the VIPS Program first began, it was understood that law enforcement volunteerism was already taking place in many agencies around the country for many years. Some departments can trace the origins of their volunteer programs back to the days of civil defense units. With the creation of the VIPS Program, this was the first effort to bring law enforcement volunteer programs together under one umbrella to foster the exchange of ideas, the sharing of best practices, and networking amongst law enforcement agencies. The VIPS Program worked fervently to create networking

opportunities for law enforcement volunteer coordinators to learn from each other and build their programs with ideas from other agencies. The VIPS Program staff understood one of the best ways to understand law enforcement volunteering was to see it first hand and set out to conduct site visits with as many law enforcement agencies that time would allow. Site visits have been integral to informing the products and resources created over the years.

Since the VIPS Program was launched, the number of registered law enforcement volunteer programs has grown to more than 1,930 law enforcement agencies representing more than 223,000 volunteers in all 50 states, Washington, DC; Puerto Rico; and Guam. The VIPS directory of registered programs also includes information on 14 international law enforcement volunteer programs, representing Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The VIPS Web site has received more than 38 million hits since its original launch.

For the fifth anniversary of the VIPS Program, a redesigned website was launched featuring an interactive Question of the Month, real-time posting of news stories about law enforcement volunteer programs, social networking linkages, and send to a friend features. The VIPS Program staff has conducted site visits with 87 law enforcement agencies, made more than 120 presentations at national, state, and local conferences, and held more than 110 no-costing training sessions where representatives from law enforcement agencies have the opportunity to network and gain valuable tools to start or enhance their volunteer program.

Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program Resources

- *Volunteer Programs: Enhancing Public Safety by Leveraging Resources*: a manual to assist in the implementation or enhancement of an agency volunteer program.
- *VIPS in Focus*: a publication series addressing specific elements and issues related to law enforcement volunteer programs. Recent topics have included *RSVP: Tapping into Valuable Assets of your Community*, *Law Enforcement Exploring: the Future of Law Enforcement*, *Serving as Extra Eyes and Ears in City Parks*, and *The Use of Volunteers in a Public Health Emergency*.
- *VIPS to VIPS*: a moderated discussion board allowing contact person(s) from registered VIPS programs to post questions, share information, and problem-solve challenges related to law enforcement volunteer programs.
- *Citizens Guide to Volunteering*: an information brochure for citizens interested in volunteering in a law enforcement agency. This brochure is customizable for your department to use to recruit volunteers
- The VIPS Resource Library: includes more than 450 sample documents, including application forms, policies, procedures and volunteer handbooks, from registered programs throughout the country.

- An educational video series which includes *Volunteers in Police Service: The Executive Perspective*, *Introducing Volunteer Activities to Law Enforcement*, *Introducing Law Enforcement Volunteerism to the Community*, *Engaging Youth through Volunteerism*, and *VIPS and Disaster Response*.
- *VIPS Info*: an electronic newsletter providing news and events about the VIPS Program and law enforcement volunteer activities around the country.
- The Technical Assistance Program: offers a range of no-cost, site-specific technical assistance to state and local law enforcement agencies, providing them with tools and guidance to develop and maintain successful volunteer programs.
- The VIPS Mentor Program: pairs law enforcement volunteer coordinators in need of support with experienced volunteer coordinators in order to provide tools and guidance to develop and maintain successful volunteer programs. There is no cost to participate in the Mentor Program.
- The VIPS Training Program: offers a range of no-cost training options for volunteer coordinators or law enforcement executives. Trainings are led by a team of practitioners with extensive experience coordinating law enforcement volunteer programs from both sworn and civilian perspectives.
- In addition to our established training courses, the VIPS Program provides educational programs for law enforcement executives and volunteer coordinators at state, regional, and national meetings or conferences.
- Law enforcement agencies can request to use the VIPS logo on materials to promote their volunteer programs

In addition, two new programs have been established as outgrowths of the VIPS Program. Since November 2005, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, the IACP has worked to identify policy and operational challenges facing law enforcement regarding sex offenders and has developed resources to assist law enforcement executives and their agencies with preventing future victimization, educating the community, holding offenders accountable, and increasing community safety. One resource was created to target agencies involving citizen volunteers in their efforts. *Managing Sex Offenders: Citizens Supporting Law Enforcement* highlights relevant sex offender legislation impacting law enforcement, identifies emerging operational challenges for law enforcement executives, and offers examples of how law enforcement agencies are using citizens to enhance and support their sex offender management and enforcement efforts.

The IACP's School Safety Initiative also builds upon the large body of work generated by the VIPS Program. The goal of the Citizen Involvement in School Safety project is to enhance the capacity of law enforcement to incorpo-

rate citizens into their school safety plans. It is important to note that “school” includes secondary schools and colleges and universities. Future resources of this on-going project will include *Community Involvement in Campus Safety*, an 11 minute video profiling law enforcement volunteer programs on university campuses. The program staff is also developing two distinct toolkits tailored to two audiences – campus law enforcement and law enforcement agencies serving secondary schools. The toolkits will include sample materials and resources to implement a VIPS program in a school or campus environment.

Benefits of Using Volunteers

Volunteers can help law enforcement in many ways that benefit community safety and law enforcement operations. They help maximize an agency’s existing resources by allowing staff to fulfill their primary policing and enforcement functions while volunteers take on ancillary responsibility. Volunteers can help provide administrative support that can get officers back on the street. They help improve public safety and act as an extra set of eyes and ears for patrol officers by participating in department-sanctioned Neighborhood Watch groups, a citizen patrol program, or by acting as a channel to share community information to sworn law enforcement officials. They provide additional services that the public wants but staff may not have the time to furnish. This may include fingerprinting children, patrolling shopping centers, directing traffic at busy intersections, or providing home checks for vacationing residents. Volunteers maintain and improve relations between the department and the community. This increases community buy-in to law enforcement efforts. Law enforcement volunteers can serve as well-informed ambassadors in your community.

Current State of Law Enforcement Volunteerism

In spring 2009, IACP surveyed registered programs via the VIPS Program Web site. The information below provides a snapshot of law enforcement volunteerism.

Experience with volunteers varied significantly:

- 72 percent of law enforcement agencies have had volunteers for more than seven years.
- The total number of volunteers ranged from two to more than 8,000.
- The total number of volunteer hours contributed in the previous year per agency ranged from 1 to 70,000.
- Agencies were asked about the structure and management of their volunteer programs:
- 97 percent said they have a volunteer program manager or coordinator. Of these agencies, 50 percent said their managers were sworn employees.
- 55 percent said they coordinate Neighborhood Watch activities in their jurisdictions.
- 40 percent said they coordinated with an external

program such as a Citizen Corps council, a Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, or a volunteer center to recruit volunteers.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various factors referred to below. The following percentages of respondents indicated that the described factor was “important” or “very important:”

- 94 percent cited value added to the department.
- 92 percent cited the ability for officers to respond to more pressing needs.
- 85 percent cited enhancing citizen understanding of the police.
- 90 percent cited the ability to provide additional services.
- Additionally, 96 percent of respondents rated the contributions of volunteers to agency effectiveness and productivity as “essential” or “very essential.”

Other information garnered from the analysis includes:

- 97 percent of agencies perform a records check on potential volunteers.
- 94 percent of agencies do not accept individuals with felony convictions.
- 89 percent of agencies require volunteers to undergo orientation and/or training.
- 88 percent have written rules and regulations governing volunteer activities.
- 88 percent require an interview before acceptance into the volunteer program.
- 88 percent require some or all of their volunteers to wear uniforms
- 56 percent provide some type of insurance coverage for volunteers.
- 30 percent formally evaluate volunteers.
- 26 percent provide volunteers with non-monetary benefits, services or incentives, such as training.

Engaging Volunteers in Your Agency

There are many aspects of a volunteer program that need to be considered before bringing volunteers on board. While the resource guide, *Volunteer Programs: Enhancing Public Safety by Leveraging Resources*, details the steps to consider, here are a few points that will get your agency started on the right path. It is important to include all community stake holders in the conversation, from agency staff to labor groups to existing community groups and volunteer centers, as well as the city or county attorney. By including everyone from the beginning, it will ensure that all concerns are considered and addressed up front. This will also help with gaining buy-in from these groups.

Conducting a needs assessment of your agency can best identify places where volunteers can easily support your agency. The purpose of a law enforcement volunteer is to supplement and support, not supplant current agency employees. Another outcome of the assessment process

will be determining the goals, objectives, and mission of your volunteer program. Establishing specific position descriptions will help screen potential volunteers and with evaluating volunteers. In addition to position descriptions, operational guidelines and policies should be established to assist with the governance the program. The final consideration is liability. Each jurisdiction will address this differently, however your city/county attorney should be able to provide guidance.

You will need a recruitment strategy to bring volunteers to your department. Crafting your message is important. So is determining how to reach your audience. Does your community have a local cable access channel? Does your department attend community or safety fairs? Does your department host a citizen academy? Your department may already have means of contacting community members in place. Once citizens are aware and interested in the opportunities that are available with your department, selection tools will need to be in place. A department must develop a set of criteria for screening potential volunteers, which should include an application and interview. The degree to which volunteers are screened is up to department discretion and is often balanced with the volunteer's assignment. After selecting a volunteer, consider your department's needs and the volunteer's skills before placing him or her into a certain position. Also, a person will need to be selected to coordinate the volunteers and their activities. This person can be sworn, civilian, or a volunteer.

Once volunteers are given an assignment they should receive an orientation to your agency and job specific training to maximize their ability to perform assigned tasks. Periodic training is a valuable tool to keep volunteers apprised of any program or policy changes and help volunteers develop useful skills. Once volunteers have been in place for some time it is importance to recognize them for their dedication. Recognition helps convey the importance of their role in your agency and will help with retaining volunteers. Recognition need not be time-consuming or expensive to be meaningful and there are many community, state, and national volunteer awards programs to help with recognition.

Assessing your volunteer program can aid in making budget and resources distribution decisions. Measuring the value of volunteer time can be done by using the same rate of pay as the person who would be doing their same job or by using the national average hourly value of volunteer time. Each year Independent Sector, a coalition of approximately 550 charities, foundations and corporate giving programs, calculates an hourly dollar value of volunteer time. The current value (2008) is \$20.25 an hour.

As mentioned earlier, the resource guide, *Volunteer Programs: Enhancing Public Safety by Leveraging Resources*, details all of the steps to consider when starting or enhancing a law enforcement volunteer program. Also consider using the VIPS Resource Library to search for application forms and position descriptions. VIPS educational videos can introduce different audiences to your volunteer program. And the *VIPS to VIPS* moderated discussion board is always available when questions arise as you plan your law enforcement volunteer program. 🌟

For More Information

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