This is a stand-alone document, unaccompanied by a model policy, designed to explore the primary issues surrounding special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams. Following extensive research, the National Law Enforcement Policy Center concluded that a discussion of the issues surrounding this important topic would be more beneficial than development of a model policy, given opposing professional views on basic considerations surrounding this topic. This document isolates and examines the predominant issue areas with the intention of providing law enforcement executives with essential information to make informed decisions—which is to implement a policy or to reject or defer decision making on this matter.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of the Document

This paper addresses Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, and provides essential background material and supporting documentation to establish a greater understanding of the philosophy behind such teams and their various implementation strategies. While this information will be of value to line and supervisory personnel as they consider issues related to SWAT and their particular agency and operational environment, it is designed to assist in the decision-making process of the chief law enforcement executive.

Tactical response situations often present elevated and/or unusual risks to the citizens and officers involved. The high-profile nature of critical incidents, which are generally beyond the resolution capability of first responders, focuses attention on the outcome, which can become the barometer by which the agency and its leadership are measured. In addition, tactical response situations can result in public scrutiny and both civil and criminal review. In acknowledgement of this, it is imperative that chief law enforcement executives maintain or have immediate access to a tactical problem-solving capability that is adequately trained, staffed, and equipped to address situations their agencies are likely to face. Recognizing the nature and variety of challenges faced, and the limited resources available for training, staffing, and equipment, executives should conduct a pre-event assessment and determine whether high-risk tactical responses will be provided in-house, in cooperation with, or by other agencies.

The IACP recognizes that the foremost consideration is always for the safety of citizens and officers; this paper is provided in furtherance of that overarching goal.

B. Definitions

Tactical team—a team of law enforcement and support professionals specifically trained to provide a planned tactical response to high-risk situations that require the application of specialized lifesaving tools, tactics, and capabilities, which exceed those immediately available to the agency’s first responders.

Barricaded suspect—a criminal suspect who has taken a position in a physical location, most often a structure or a vehicle, that does not allow immediate police access—whether fortified or not—and who is refusing police orders to surrender. A barricaded suspect may be known to be armed, thought to be armed, have access to weapons in the location, or be in an unknown weapons status.

Barricaded subject—a person who is not suspected of committing a crime, but is the focus of a legitimate police intervention effort, most often involving threats of
suicide or mental illness, who has taken a position in a physical location, most often a structure or a vehicle, that does not allow immediate police access—whether fortified or not—and who is refusing police orders to surrender. A barricaded subject may be known to be armed, thought to be armed, have access to weapons in the location, or be in an unknown weapons status.

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Some disagreement exists concerning the catalyst that created SWAT teams in American policing, but it is generally accepted that the pivotal event occurred on August 1, 1966, at the University of Texas at Austin. On that date, an ex-Marine Corps rifleman climbed to the 28th floor observation deck of the university’s landmark clock tower and, over the course of 90 minutes, shot 47 people—17 of whom died.

This was not the first mass murder in the United States, but it was unique in a number of ways. Law enforcement didn’t arrive at the University of Texas Tower after the fact to conduct a homicide investigation. They drove into an ongoing 90-minute barrage of deadly accurate rifle fire; during which time, the suspect graphically demonstrated how ill-trained, ill-equipped, and ill-prepared police agencies in the United States were to deal with a proficient and determined adversary. During this same general time frame, many of our nation’s urban areas were being set ablaze by rioters, and emergency personnel responding to the scene were often fired upon by snipers. Law enforcement agencies nationwide quickly recognized that these incidents were beyond the skills, training, and equipment of the officers in the field. As a result, some departments began forming teams that were committed to handling “special” or unusually high-risk events, with their primary focus at this stage being a viable response to sniper situations.

One of the first agencies to formally establish a SWAT capability was the Los Angeles Police Department, and their “station defense teams” of 1967. Initially, these part-time teams were comprised of 15 four-man cadres, consisting of individuals drawn from various units within the department. The members all had prior military experience and were given monthly training consistent with the tasks they were likely to face, including sniper situations and providing security for police facilities during periods of civil unrest. These teams were assigned full time to the Metropolitan Division in 1971 when it was determined the part-time status had a negative impact on rapid response to callout situations. Then as now, being able to rapidly respond to a critical incident was recognized as being a key component in the life safety equation. The Los Angeles Police Department issued a report following their early 1970s interaction with the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), and cited four trends that prompted the development of their team:

- The Watts Riots, which forced department members into tactical situations for which they were ill prepared
- The emergence of snipers as a challenge to civil order
- The appearance of the political assassin
- The threat of urban guerrilla warfare by militant groups

The report concluded that the purpose of the SWAT team was, “to provide protection, support, security, firepower, and rescue to police operations in high-risk situations, where specialized tactics are necessary to minimize casualties.”

The number of SWAT teams in the United States has steadily increased since then, with most of the units being structurally and operationally impacted by the political events at the time and to a lesser degree the years that followed. High-profile shootouts with the Black Panther Party and SLA may have catapulted SWAT onto the front pages of the newspaper, but it was the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act (DAPCA) of 1970 and President Richard M. Nixon that laid the foundation for most of the SWAT work that has occurred over the 40 years that followed. The DAPCA under Title II specifically authorized “no-knock” search warrants in cases (such as drug investigations) where physical evidence might reasonably be destroyed, and it did this at the same time the president was identifying drug abuse as a serious threat to national security and officially declaring the “war on drugs.” SWAT teams by virtue of their training, equipment, and general availability found themselves uniquely qualified to fill the foot soldier role in this battle. The public policy focus on controlled substance abuse was shifting from treatment to enforcement, during a time in which heavily armed drug distribution networks began appearing in urban, and not so urban, areas of the country. Teams that were originally created for extraordinary response to dangerous situations (such as snipers) operationally evolved in many cases into the front line of U.S. drug law enforcement strategy.

III. CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Though debate on the appropriate role of the federal government exists today, it is beyond dispute that the early history of the United States, beginning with the Articles of Confederation, was one of a weak central government with most of the power residing in the state and local authorities. Nowhere is this tradition of local control more prominently displayed than in our police and sheriff’s departments.
There are approximately 18,800 law enforcement agencies in the United States, and each is committed to the safety, protection, and service of those within its community. As a result of varied and diverse influences, including funding; organizational and community culture; interpretation of case law and federal, state, and local statute; and personality/preference of those in positions of authority, these agencies demonstrate a remarkable level of autonomy. The term profession is defined in many ways with the common theme being, “a body of people in a learned occupation.” Upon examination of policing nationwide, it appears clear that law enforcement meets the definition of a “learned” occupation. Every state in the union requires applicants to have some level of training or learning prior to serving as peace officers. Likewise, and perhaps somewhat unique to law enforcement, is how varied this “learned” occupation process can be, and how doctrine serves to separate agencies.

Law enforcement has a generally accepted body of principles and beliefs but lacks a universally accepted, specific, or codified process for their implementation. As a result, most agencies generally exercise the autonomy to do things the way they deem appropriate, absent a binding legal decision or applicable state statute to the contrary. This is not to suggest that law enforcement is void of common practice. However, defining what is “generally accepted and common” is the initial challenge, followed by an agency’s authority to dispute that definition and ignore it—absent a legal obligation to do otherwise. SWAT is not immune to the exercise of law enforcement autonomy as outlined above, and, in recognition of this, the following information is provided as an overview of the varied and diverse tactical processes that are commonly observed.

IV. NECESSITY, COMPOSITION, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Prevalence

SWAT teams were originally limited to the largest police departments, where sufficient numbers of personnel and the financial resources were available to staff, train, and equip a specialized unit. In addition, the large agencies had sufficient numbers of high-risk “callout” situations to justify the allocation of the personnel and absorb the costs involved. Over time, agencies of various sizes throughout the United States began fielding SWAT teams.

It has been estimated that 90 percent of the police departments serving populations in excess of 50,000 have a SWAT team today, and 70 percent of those serving smaller communities have a team as well. In consideration of this and the original rationale for creating SWAT, a legitimate, often-asked question is “do all of these agencies really need a SWAT team?” That question can best be answered by examining the process that led to the formation of the early teams themselves and applying it to the crime trends and circumstances of today.

In the late 1960s, police agencies looked at Austin, Watts, and other “hot spots” around the country, and recognized that they were unable to appropriately respond to similar sniper and civil unrest situations. In response, many created special units geared toward resolving these critical problems. This preplanning process involved the identification of the critical incidents they were most likely to face and, then, candidly evaluating their agencies’ ability to resolve these incidents with existing personnel, training, equipment, and resources. If the agency found its ability and/or resources lacking, then steps were taken to address the deficiency. In many cases, that meant creating a SWAT team.

This process is still valid today and involves ongoing and continuous community assessments to ensure that timely and accurate threat identification is taking place and adequate contingency plans are set in motion. If the threat assessment of today was still focused on sniper situations, violent public disorder, and the statistical probability of either occurring, many responsible agencies would appropriately pass on the commitment of time and resources necessary to field a SWAT team. Regrettfully, today’s threat assessment looks vastly different than those of our tactical forefathers. Sniper situations and public disorder are still legitimate department concerns, but they are relatively low on the statistical contingency planning list when compared to more contemporary risks and concerns such as the following:

- Terrorism (foreign and domestic) response preparedness, with special emphasis on large-scale, massive loss-of-life situations such as those recently observed in Beslan and Mumbai
- Hostage taking
- Barricaded armed suspects
- Barricaded suicidal subjects
- Interaction with violent mentally ill subjects
- High-risk arrest and search warrant service
- High-risk surveillance details
- Visiting dignitaries

Assessment of tactical needs. Chief law enforcement executives should conduct an assessment of tactical incidents that have occurred or are reasonably likely to occur within their jurisdictions. This assessment should be based on local activities, businesses, and geography. For example, the types of tactical incidents in a jurisdiction with a seaport or metropolitan central business district may differ significantly from those in a more rural jurisdiction, though certain types are likely to occur in jurisdictions of all types. A common mistake is to establish a SWAT team
and make the team responsible for “everything that can happen,” except routine patrol. The assessment of tactical needs allows the executive to apply resources to those needs that may reasonably arise and look to other resources to address more extraordinary events.

**Assessment of tactical resources.** In light of the varying resources available, executives should assess their agency’s capability to provide the required response to tactical incidents.

The first part of this assessment should focus on the agency’s capacity for staffing a specific tactical response. For example, the chief executive should assess the number of officers required to effectively execute a high-risk warrant and the agency’s ability to provide this level of staffing, including providing for operational command and supervision.

The second phase of this assessment is based on a review of the necessary equipment to effectively perform this task and whether the agency’s funding capacity can provide the required tools.

Finally, law enforcement agency chief executives should identify the skills required to perform each task associated with a tactical response capability and the agency’s ability to provide the necessary training to master and maintain the required skills. Those skills required for execution of a high-risk warrant will differ from those skills required to address a barricaded person in a vehicle. Chief executives should recognize the differences in training demands for each set of tactical skills.

At the conclusion of this assessment, agency chief executives may find that their agencies are unable to provide some or all of the tactical responses with the existing resources. These executives should determine a mechanism to provide for those responses in which they bear a jurisdictional responsibility to address, but for which their agencies do not currently have the resources to provide a response.

In response to this assessment, most contemporary agencies nationwide have provided for an enhanced tactical response in one of the following ways:

- Created a properly trained and well-equipped SWAT team to address the problems that extend beyond the capabilities of the first responders
- Entered into a mutual-aid agreement with a neighboring or concurrent jurisdiction that already has the desired tactical response
- Created a properly trained and well-equipped SWAT team for specific functions with limited resource requirements and entered into a mutual-aid agreement with a neighboring or concurrent jurisdiction to provide a combined team for operations requiring greater staffing or capability
- Committed personnel, equipment, and/or financial resources to a multi-agency/jurisdictional SWAT team that can provide the desired tactical response capability for member agencies and their communities

**B. Structure**

SWAT teams are structured in a variety of ways; the majority use one of the following configurations:

**Part-time team.** The vast majority of teams nationwide (approximately 99 percent) are part-time teams, with members having primary duties and responsibilities outside of SWAT. The involved officers work full time in a variety of assignments such as uniformed patrol, investigations, and narcotics and are subject to being called out in certain circumstances as a member of the part-time SWAT team. Part-time teams are usually found under the operations division in their agency’s organizational chart. This is due to their primary responsibilities by definition (policy or unit mandate), usually involving operational elevated risk situations such as barricaded subjects or the taking of hostages, and the fact that most part-time teams consist mostly of patrol officers. It is important to note that many part-time teams experience intra-agency friction as a result of the competing interests and priorities that exist, when officers from one division (patrol) are “called out” or tasked with assignments such as pre-raid planning for another division (for example, search warrants). Activities such as this have a negative impact on patrol staffing when it involves on-duty personnel and patrol overtime budgets for off-duty personnel. Problems related to this can be minimized by long-term scheduling of training days and ensuring that personnel are not called out or committed to SWAT duties absent strict adherence to a clearly defined process, which is reviewed by higher authority for compliance.

**Full-time team—collateral duties.** This structure involves officers assigned full time to the SWAT unit, but who answer calls for service or perform other non-SWAT functions when not committed to their primary duty (call outs, mission-related tasks, training, and so forth). This may appear the same as a part-time team, but it differs dramatically in that the officer may do “regular” patrol work when not committed to SWAT activities, but the officer does not fill a beat or work an assignment for which persons outside of SWAT are counting on him or her to be present and available. This availability for SWAT work, proactive or reactive, greatly enhances the unit’s operational readiness and avoids the inherent conflict and friction that exist when trying to serve competing divisions and priorities. It also allows the flexibility to participate in training and use team members on a moment’s notice, as needed, without consideration or concern for staffing levels.
in other areas. This structure is far less common than the part-time team, but it is generating interest with proactive agencies seeking to balance high-risk contingency planning and operational preparedness with overall agency goals and objectives.

**Full-time team.** These teams have members assigned to SWAT in a full-time capacity, and, generally, members have no patrol or other collateral police duties outside of the special operations mission. Their entire workday is committed to SWAT-related activities, which include not only training, mission planning, equipment maintenance, and actual operations, but pre-event high-risk site assessments on locations that are statistically likely to involve a high-risk intervention (e.g., schools, government buildings, abortion clinics, emergency rooms, mental health facilities, and banks.).

Full-time team structures like these are rare and generally found only in the largest and busiest police agencies. When considering the potential risks facing communities today, it is difficult to argue against dedicating a team exclusively to tactical preparedness and response. However, there are competing priorities that relate to the allocation of personnel and agency resources. The practical reality today is that many departments are unable to meet minimum staffing in core service areas such as patrol and investigations, which for most agencies precludes staff being committed full time to SWAT. As with paramedics and firefighters prepared and waiting at their station for a call, the full-time SWAT team concept offers the greatest probability of providing tactical resources when and where they are needed.

**Hybrid team.** This structure involves a team with both full-time and part-time members as described above, with the full-time cadre being smaller in number and tasked with conducting the day-to-day tactical team functions. The part-time cadre is available for callout and participates in training. Structures such as this offer most of the benefits of a full-time team, with a reduced draw on personnel and resources. Variations exist in training and equipment—some hybrid teams mandate that each element be trained and equipped to the same level, while others train and/or equip the part-time members to a lesser standard.

**Internal structure.** SWAT team internal structure varies based on factors that include organizational chart placement and team operational duties and responsibilities. A critical consideration for chief law enforcement executives is selecting and appointing a SWAT team commander responsible for training, deploying, and directing overall SWAT operations. Some factors include a smaller candidate pool (that is, management staff versus line staff); experience and operational knowledge; rank and rotational assignments; promotions; and organizational pressures and dynamics.

As a result, some chief executives risk appointing a manager who is lacking in experience, qualifications, and/or the capability to oversee this critical function. This risk becomes even more problematic when the position is considered part time and/or involves multiple jurisdictions. The successful outcome of high-risk operations is directly related to the chief executive’s vetting process in selecting the appropriate commander.

Chief executives can aid in training and developing a SWAT team commander, but the appointee must possess personal commitment to learning all aspects of the role. The IACP, many states, and local and private entities offer command-level training courses, providing instruction and practical applications in many of the suggested core competencies. Examples include the following:

- Incident command
- Tactical command
- Communication
- Liaison with allied units and agencies
- Command post operations
- Force options
- Tactical team capabilities
- Training and operational reporting requirements

Most agencies, at a minimum, have the following general elements in their team structure:

- The commander is responsible for the overall operation of the team, beginning with selecting, training, and equipping personnel and ending with providing overall guidance and direction during the resolution of a critical incident.
- The team leader is generally a sergeant or of first-line supervisory rank, and should have the pre-requisite knowledge, training, and experience necessary to be in charge of the day-to-day operations of the team. These include routine supervision (management and discipline); training and oversight of training; equipment assessment, procurement, and accountability; operational readiness; operational planning; and documentation and record keeping.
- The assistant team leader is an officer qualified to act in the team leader’s absence and perform team leader duties when called upon.
- The team members are line officers assigned to SWAT, whose duties and responsibilities may include general and specialized tactical skill sets and are varied based on the duties and responsibilities of the team itself.
C. Team Size

Team size is varied and diverse nationwide, with the overriding assumption and premise being that they must be large enough to ensure adequate and properly trained resources for the situations they will likely be called upon to resolve. The practical reality is few agencies can demonstrate that the size of their team reflects such a comprehensive process, with most not staffing at the number needed for all likely situations, but at the number needed for the single most common—search warrant service.

Other factors that impact this process are competing personnel interests from other divisions or units and the budgetary impact each additional team member has on personnel, equipment, and training costs. In acknowledgement of this, forward-looking and practical team commanders recognize their obligation to be prepared for likely contingencies, while being a part of a unified agency community service effort. Upon balancing the competing interests, priorities, and staffing and budgeting issues involved, most agencies will conclude that adequate SWAT numbers based on contingency planning will be difficult to achieve by themselves. As a result, numerous agencies have drawn together and combined resources; coordinated their team structures, tactics, and training; and completed the necessary intergovernmental agreements to allow multijurisdictional support and response in the appropriate circumstances.

D. Jurisdiction

Independent of the federal and state SWAT teams, most units in the United States have authority that is defined by statute and limited to the jurisdiction in which team members are commissioned to serve. There are some variations of this, with the more common being outlined as follows:

Single agency team and jurisdiction. This is the most common type of team, and involves agencies that create, train, staff, equip, and maintain their own tactical entity for the exclusive use of their department and the community it serves. The primary benefit of this structure is that the agency has absolute control over every aspect of the team. Considering the risks, potential consequences, and accountability involved in high-risk, color-of-law tactical operations, many agencies believe that exerting total internal agency control is a fundamental part of responsible police management, not subject to delegation or handling by personnel from outside the agency. The primary negative aspect of this structure may be the cost benefit analysis as it relates to creating and maintaining a team in the same geographical area as other competent teams, as compared to pooling or sharing operational resources as outlined below.

Single agency team/multijurisdictional responsibility. This type of structure involves an agency that creates, trains, staffs, equips, and maintains its own tactical entity, but is willing to contract and provide SWAT services to area agencies. The primary benefit of this structure is the access multiple agencies have to quality tactical services at a community cost that is far less than if each agency fielded its own team. This structure is often observed in areas where a larger agency has an established team and has contracted to provide services to the smaller surrounding communities. Issues such as cost, callout criteria, tactical decision-making authority, operational control, and liability management are addressed in a mutual-aid agreement, to the satisfaction of all involved. The primary negative aspect of this structure is that the tactical team and its agency are exposed to physical risk and liability that was not present prior to the mutual-aid agreement. In addition, various levels of control for everyone involved (team, contracted/contracting agency, and so forth) are potentially negotiated away in the mutual-aid agreement.

Combined teams. This type of structure allows agencies to establish well-trained and well-equipped SWAT teams of limited size and exert primary internal control over what would typically be the majority of the operations they encounter: high-risk warrant service and rapid response to other call-driven high-risk incidents. It also acknowledges the limited capacity of most agencies to staff larger operations or those which would extend over longer periods of time. Entering into mutual-aid agreements with other agencies for a response by two or more combined teams provides for additional staffing capability in the event an operation requires a more robust response.

Multijurisdictional team and responsibility. This type of structure represents a joint venture between departments in a particular geographical area, who agree to pool their personnel, equipment, training, and financial resources to ensure cost-effective, high-quality tactical services for the agencies involved. The positive and negative aspects are similar to those found in the single agency contracted situation outlined above, but this structure is unique in that multijurisdictional teams potentially have access to many more officers than a single agency. This creates opportunities for the participants to expand the concept and build in various components such as relief elements for large-scale operations, specialized units such as high-risk surveillance teams, and a dedicated, well-staffed negotiations component.
E. Agency Agreements

Law enforcement agency chief executives should familiarize themselves with the training, standards, protocols, staffing, and qualifications of tactical teams with whom they may enter into an agreement to support their agencies or their agencies’ SWAT teams. Procedures should be established to address qualifications, selection processes, physical and tactical competency, and training standards needed to master and retain necessary skills. Executives should address the establishment of chain of command and reporting expectations. Specifically, overall command should be defined in advance as well as the subordinate role of operational command and supervision. Agency executives should reach a general consensus and understanding of the types of tactics to be deployed, consistent with contemporary police thinking and strategy, and rules of engagement. Since use-of-force guidelines will vary among agencies, a multijurisdictional team policy regarding the use of force and procedures for applying and documenting the use of force should be considered.

Member agencies will differ in size, population, staffing, and response frequency within their various jurisdictions. As such, executives should address issues related to responsibility for the cost of supplies, equipment, and personnel—including salary, benefits, overtime, training, and workers’ compensation. They must also address issues related to indemnification, liability insurance, and legal representation. Costs of legal representation should be identified.

These agreements should be formally documented and include provisions for withdrawal from participation or termination of the agreement. The chief law enforcement executives from the member agencies should review the need for an oversight board composed of all or some member executives.

F. Duties and Responsibilities

Many SWAT teams today have a unit mandate or policy statement that provides a general rationale for their position and purpose. Common themes include, “to provide protection and safety for innocent civilians and police personnel, while reducing the probability of death or serious injury to persons involved in a high-risk incident.” Broad statements such as this rarely serve a definitive purpose. Likewise, they offer little in the way of describing the actual tasks that a SWAT team performs, which are as varied and diverse as the agencies that create and support them.

As outlined previously, the original SWAT concept was for counter-sniper and extremely high-risk situations related to public disorder and militant groups. Over the years SWAT evolved and now takes on operational roles that differ greatly from that of the early teams. This evolutionary process has not been without criticism or controversy, with some in the public and academic domains challenging what they describe as the inappropriate expansion of SWAT from its original “high-risk–specialized action” role, to more traditional police activity, involving mostly drug law enforcement. The report from one survey of 690 police agencies serving populations in excess of 50,000 suggested that SWAT team use had increased 538 percent since 1980, with 75 percent of the activities devoted to serving drug warrants.

Most SWAT teams in the United States claim a list of their common “duties and responsibilities,” which are included in, but not limited to, the situations outlined below. It is important to note that based on the number of things listed that rarely if ever occur, the list might be more accurately described as the things for which the team has taken responsibility to plan, prepare, train, and equip.

- Terrorist incidents
- Hostage rescue
- Barricaded suspect/subject incidents
- High-risk warrant service
- Interaction with dangerous, mentally ill subjects
- Dignitary escort/protection
- High-risk prisoner security/transport
- High-risk narcotics operations independent of warrant service, including officer safety/security during drug buys; buy/bust operations; vehicle assault/arrest scenarios; and high-risk surveillance of drug fields, labs, and suspects.
- General high-risk surveillance (armed robbery stakeouts, etc.)

The IACP provides training for SWAT team commanders and line operators, and, during class discussions on actual operations, anecdotal evidence has revealed that SWAT teams in the United States spend most of their time performing the following two functions and training and preparing for the third.

Serving search warrants. This is the most common task SWAT teams are performing today, and the frequency in which they are used to serve search warrants is generally impacted by organizational philosophy, unit structure, and actual need.

Service assignment considerations: Some agencies use the SWAT team to serve every search warrant, arguing that the very nature of an entry into a suspect’s domain is inherently “high risk.” Others are reluctant to activate the team and disrupt core service delivery and opt to use patrol officers and/or investigators. Either extreme is potentially flawed, with one demonstrating overuse of a team created to deal with high-risk interventions, while the other demonstrates underuse of the same asset that elevates the risks to everyone involved.
A more logical and balanced approach involves using specifically defined assessment criteria to determine the reasonableness of using the SWAT team on any operation, not just search warrants. Some agencies believe that the team should be used in any case where specialized tactics and techniques are involved, such as door breaching and searching for subjects after entry is denied. The basis for this opinion is found in case law, which suggests that agencies should train officers practically for the duties they are likely to face. Most street officers are not trained or equipped for breaching doors and are inadequately trained in residential search techniques.

Additional thoughts on the reasonableness of the decision as to who should serve the warrant involve considering not just who the best trained officers are for the task at hand but also the specific and identified threats involved. Threat assessment is the primary and most common criteria most agencies report using when determining whether SWAT should be called, but even that can vary by agency as high-risk criteria definitions differ greatly by department. As a result, what is a “routine” search warrant for one team may in fact be a high-risk one for another. Many agencies also report using a factors matrix to assist in determining which warrants should be served by SWAT, but, due to a lack of consistency in how such factors are weighted, the presence of a matrix does not ensure consistency of deployment.

Service tactics: In addition to the lack of consistency concerning when a team should be used, there is also a general lack of consistency on the tactics used as well. Search warrants can be served in a variety of ways ranging from no-knock, dynamic entries to surround and call out, with variations in between that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Breach with controlled entry
- Breach and delay—controlled entry
- Breach and hold—call out

Until the early 2000s, many tactical teams focused almost exclusively on minimal or zero delay at the breach point and then dynamic entry and searching techniques. A review of tactical team training programs in the 1990s would reveal heavy emphasis on dynamic entry, with alternative warrant service techniques virtually ignored. There were alternative searching techniques such as stealth and angles, bunker/mirror, K-9 long line, and pole cameras, but these were generally used only in barricade-type situations when the element of surprise had been lost. The emphasis on dynamic search warrant entry has diminished in recent years due to an enhanced focus on the law and concerns over the safety of everyone involved.

The law as it relates to the requirement for “knock and announce” is clearly established, and, as such, police officers executing a search warrant should not immediately force their way into a suspect’s home absent exigent circumstances or a warrant that specifically authorizes such tactics (no-knock warrant). Instead, the law requires that they first knock, identify themselves and their intent, and then wait a reasonable amount of time for the occupants to let them in. This delay generally results in a loss of the element of surprise, which is a prerequisite for an effective dynamic entry. Officers are not required to “knock and announce” when it is unreasonable to do so—most often when they can articulate a reasonable belief of danger or a reasonable belief that the suspects could destroy evidence during the time between the knock and entry. These exceptions are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, are varied and diverse, and must be considered in the totality of the circumstances as the officers decide how long they will wait at the door before forcing entry. In addition to this, some have suggested that as the number of no-knock and dynamic warrant entries have increased, so have the number of accidental, erroneous, and officer down shootings as well.

In consideration of the legal obligations and the risk of injury on both sides of the badge, most teams today are critically examining their search warrant entry tactics. The focus is on compliance with the law and accomplishing mission objectives with the highest probability of safety for everyone involved. In furtherance of this effort, most teams keep an open mind concerning tactics and avoid focusing on a single technique at the exclusion of all others. Each case is different and unique in its own way, and the key to safe and effective tactical problem solving is maintaining a diverse and contemporary set of skills and applying the right skill set to the circumstances presented.

Barricaded situations. This is the second most common function that SWAT teams perform. These situations involve a suspect or a subject who has taken a position in a physical location, most often a structure or vehicle, that does not allow immediate police access—whether fortified or not—and who is refusing police orders to exit. This person may be known to be armed, thought to be armed, have access to weapons in the location, or be in an unknown weapons status.

Many agencies today will use properly trained, equipped, and supervised field officers to respond to and contain a potential barricaded suspect or barricaded subject situation. Should the situation involve overtly dangerous or assaultive behavior directed toward officers or citizens or involve suspects wanted on serious crimes, the tactical team should respond and address the problem. In all other cases, the situation should be closely examined upon initial stabilization, and a determination should be made.
concerning the need to force the suspect or subject from the location as compared to the potential consequences involved. Special consideration will be given to the following:

- The commitment of agency personnel and resources and the impact this might have on response capability to other critical incidents within the community.
- The impact on the community surrounding the police operation.
- The severity of the crime or situation involved.
- The agency safety priorities and the recognition of the inherent risks involved when tactics are used to resolve a barricade.

Many agencies today will avoid entering into a barricade resolution scenario involving intrusive police tactics such as window clearing, mechanized ram, chemical agents and related munitions, breach and hold, robot entry and search, off-leash K-9 search, and long-leash K-9/entry team search, absent the authority of a search or arrest warrant or a court authorized mental health commitment order. Should the circumstances presented preclude the team from obtaining such court authorization to act, the most reasonable course of action, and one that has often proven the hardest, may be to leave.

In the vast majority of barricade situations, agency negotiators are successful in causing the subject to peacefully surrender. As such, all reasonable efforts in furtherance of that resolution process should be exhausted prior to moving to tactics. Likewise, in cases where negotiations are unproductive and the suspect or the subject needs to be taken into custody, the use of intrusive tactics are generally accepted in elevated risk problem solving and should precede stand-alone entry into the structure for apprehension.

**Hostage situations.** Hostage takings are one of the rarest events that tactical teams will be called upon to resolve and one with the greatest risk. As such, most teams spend a disproportionate amount of time training and preparing for such events because the consequences involved are so significant. It is important to note that effecting rescue through tactics, with the exception of the long rifle, is an extremely dangerous situation that demands the best possible SWAT team performance at every step in the process. Commanders must critically and honestly assess their teams’ capabilities well in advance of such situations, to ensure that adequate planning, training, and validation of the requisite skill sets have taken place. Anything less has a high probability of operational failure.

Hostage situations generally involve a person being held against his or her will by an armed, potentially armed, or otherwise dangerous subject. Most agencies affirm the inherent value and sanctity of all human life and are committed to making every reasonable effort to peacefully resolve hostage situations through the process of negotiations. Likewise, it is important to recognize that police officers are empowered by law and entrusted with the defense of innocent persons held in deadly jeopardy. As such, properly trained and equipped officers should take direct action, up to and including the use of deadly force, to ensure the safe release of a hostage facing deadly jeopardy, or the commission of a crime under statute that would justify the use of deadly force to prevent or stop, and should do so at the first opportunity presented with a high probability of success. Most SWAT teams responding to hostage situations will focus on initial containment, establishing a reactionary element to counter any spontaneous suspect activity, and putting long rifle marksman teams in place. Taking action in cases such as this seems reasonable to most police managers when discussed outside the crisis site but has historically proven problematic if not addressed and clarified in a pre-event process with training and written policy to reinforce the decision.

V. **SUPPORT UNITS**

Contemporary SWAT team structure generally involves varied positions and skill sets based on threat assessment and contingency planning, including unique areas that demand enhanced levels of specialized training. Command level consideration must be given to the impact (budgetary, operational, personnel, and training) each position will have on the agency, and steps must be taken to ensure that where appropriate, the skill set is either available on staff or through mutual aid. Examples include, but are not limited to, long rifle observers, tactical medics, explosive breachers, crisis negotiators, and tactical communications technicians.

- Tactical medics are often emergency medical technicians or law enforcement personnel that receive specialized training in the area of combat medicine and casualty care. This specialized role is then integrated into the tactical environments in which the SWAT team finds itself deployed.
- Crisis negotiators are commonly deployed during barricade or hostage incidents. The number of personnel designated to this role depends largely on the considerations listed previously. Nevertheless, a team of individuals is able to compartmentalize duties and responsibilities in order to provide support for the main negotiator. Crisis negotiators also provide critical information for the SWAT commander to assess the overall operation. Crisis negotiators are becoming increasingly multidimensional with cross-training in crisis intervention, suicide prevention...
Tactical communications technicians are often an integral part of the incident command post. Tactical communications technicians receive specialized training in recording operational details and personnel assignments. They also provide access to information from law enforcement databases for intelligence support. In addition, tactical communications technicians provide the first level of contact in securing additional resources and/or communicating with other agencies, public utilities, and others.

VI. TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

SWAT stands for “special weapons and tactics,” and much of the special work a SWAT team does involves skills and expertise that is acquired through unique training, education, and experience. Officers who elect to participate in such functions and the supervisors who guide and direct them are held to a higher training and performance standard under the law. In recognition of this, training is an important SWAT team issue and one that is the focus of much disagreement and controversy.

A. Training Duty

The standard for police training as it relates to a civil rights violation was established in the U.S. Supreme Court case, City of Canton v. Harris. The basic premise is that where it is foreseeable that a police officer will face a particular task that may result in harm to another, the agency must provide training in how to conduct that task in a manner that is consistent with generally accepted police practices. “Generally accepted” is hard to define at times, since practices accepted in one place may be disputed, disavowed, and outright ignored in others. Likewise, the courts have said that “generally accepted practice” is defined by the law enforcement profession and by court decisions analyzing police conduct. It is clear that teams have to train in areas of both general and specialized policing. The question then becomes, what specific topics should be covered?

B. Training Topics

The legal analysis of the obligation to be cognizant of civil rights by SWAT team members is outlined as follows:

- The policy maker must know to a reasonable degree of certainty that team members will confront a given situation.
- The situation either presents a team member with a difficult choice that training or supervision would make less difficult, or there is a history of team members mishandling the situation.
- The situation is such that a wrong choice by a team member may cause the deprivation of a citizen’s constitutional rights.

The practical analysis of SWAT team training parallels the legal analysis and, in addition, focuses on tasks the team members are required to fulfill—not just those likely to cause harm to others. In consideration of the above, a SWAT commander evaluating training topics must first analyze the team’s duties and responsibilities and then conduct core competency testing of defined skills required for that tactical function to determine the foundational level of knowledge possessed by team members. Once that has been done, a training program can be established that ensures basic skill sets are in place in both general and specialized topics, which is then followed with a training program to ensure that the desired skill sets are maintained.

The topics are as varied and diverse as the team itself and determined exclusively by assessing what the team is likely to face, their foundational knowledge base, the desired skill set, and the level of training needed to achieve and maintain that skill set. This can be a significant undertaking, as most teams are tasked with not only the primary duties and responsibility skill sets as outlined above, but those sub/support/specialty skill sets discussed earlier. Some additional specialty areas include the following:

- Police long rifle/marksmen
- Breaching—mechanical and explosive
- Electronic surveillance
- Firearms instruction—multidiscipline
- Firearms maintenance
- Less-lethal munitions (noise/flash diversionary devices, chemical agents, impact projectiles)
- Team movement (dynamic entry, bunker mirror/stealth, open field)

C. Time Committed to Training

Recognizing that many teams lack the training that is necessary to safely and effectively meet mission objectives, minimum training standards that identify specific amounts of time that must be committed to basic, advanced, and maintenance skill set training has been put forth. Unrealistically, predetermined blocks of time suggest each team and its members are at a particular skill level, and that skill level can be adequately maintained by the time frame provided. The practical reality is that no two teams or team members are alike, and only after a needs assessment and core competency testing have taken place can time needed for training a particular team be established. Anecdotal
evidence suggests most part-time teams in the United States train between 8 and 16 hours per month, and most full-time teams train between 25 and 50 percent of their on-duty time—with additional time allocated for specialty assignments such as police long rifle marksmen. It is also important to note that based on the duties of a particular team and the core competency of its members, the time frames noted above may be insufficient or excessive. In recognition of this, police executives must ensure that adequate time is committed to team training based on operational need and member competency, as opposed to an artificially and or externally established, "minimum standard."

D. Validating Learning

Any block of instruction worth teaching is worth testing to ensure that learning has been achieved. Commanders must ensure that all training is directly tied to the teams’ duties and responsibilities, consistent with policy and practice, and supported by the following:

- Written curriculum
- Expanded lesson plan
- Validated learning through both written and practical examinations
- Post-training report

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper was not intended to be all inclusive, but to provide an overview of SWAT teams and to provide chief law enforcement executives insight into some of the contemporary issues SWAT teams are facing today.

While there is no single formula for ensuring adequate tactical resources for every possible event, chief law enforcement executives can balance the budgetary resources available to meet the requirements for both general and specialized police functions in their agencies. By assessing community tactical needs, evaluating resources, and using both internal and external tactical resources, chief executives can provide a safer environment for police officers and a better quality of life for the citizens served.

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