Mentoring Program for Female Cadets

Contributed by Lt. Eve Stephens - Austin, TX, Police Department
In 2018, 15 females began Austin Police Department’s (APD) 139th academy class. This was the highest level of gender diversity ever in an APD academy class with 25% of cadets being female. By graduation, the number of females had dropped to 7. This reflected an attrition rate of almost 50% for females, which was substantially higher than the male attrition rate of 23%.

Working as the Staffing Lieutenant at the time, Lt. Stephens was processing these numbers and began to wonder what was going on at the Academy. The first thing she did was pull up stats for past academy classes to see if the 139th class was an anomaly or if the female attrition rate was part of a trend. She discovered that at least for the last 5 cadet classes in recent years female attrition rates were twice as high as the attrition rates for men. Investigating the issue, she also noticed that APD had substantially fewer women in its ranks than other major cities. In 2018, women made up only 10% of sworn officers in the department. Her reading indicated that, on average, women make up 17% of sworn officers in major US cities.

Lt. Stephens started to wonder why APD’s numbers were so low and if there was anything she could do to help retain female cadets entering the academy. After considering a variety of options, she settled on the idea of starting a mentoring program for female cadets. APD had made a few attempts in the past to introduce and promote a voluntary mentorship program for all cadets going through APD’s Academy. However, those programs were not structured, supported, and had little participation. As such, they quickly fell by the wayside. She made it a point to address these pitfalls by creating structure, building support, and encouraging participation.

Lt. Stephens contacted some high ranking and tenured female officers in the department for their support. Likewise, she researched law enforcement mentorship programs, searched for academic articles on law enforcement mentorship programs, and did a substantial amount of reading on creating mentorship programs. In the end, she realized that, given limited available information, there was going to be a lot of trial and error.

APD’s Women’s Mentorship Program was implemented with the 140th cadet class which started October 2018. 16 females started in this academy class. In the end, only 4 graduated. Lt. Stephens was concerned the mentorship program was not working, but she also recognized there may be other factors to consider. She reached out to a professor at a local university and explained she was looking for someone to help her. Specifically, she was looking for a researcher who could conduct an independent evaluation of the mentorship program. The professor she contacted connected her with Dr. Anne Li Kringen.

Dr. Kringen agreed to help and began evaluating the mentoring program in the 141st cadet class, which began in June 2019. Coincidentally, the 141st cadet class was another historic class having the highest number of women to ever start a cadet class in Austin. 23 of the 71 cadets were women. This was going to be the perfect class for evaluation. In addition, Lt. Stephens was able to transfer to the academy during this time. 17 of the 23 women went on to graduate the academy in January 2020. In the end, Dr. Kringen and Lt. Stephens discovered many things about women in the academy and the mentoring program. Dr Kringen will be writing up the findings in a research paper.
To have this program be successful, Lt. Stephens has found that there needs to be one facilitator who keeps track of information and collects data. It is also helpful to have this person work directly in the training academy. If that is not possible, the facilitator will need to have intimate contact with someone who does work at the Training Academy.

Lt. Stephens did not have a lot of problems with buy in from upper management, but she did have problems with getting upper management to believe me when she presented the issues we were finding. Although she started to hear about the disparate treatment women were receiving in the academy with the 139th cadet class, it wasn’t until similar information came up with the 141st cadet class that changes were made. Lt. Stephens believes that most of the changes were made because of the involvement of a research partner. She has found that voices outside the department can be powerful.

Since the program was implemented, they have observed an increased the number of female cadets completing the academy. Overall, this has related to an increase in female representation within the department from 10% to 11%.

If you are interested in implementing a similar program or initiating change related to recruiting and mentoring women recruits, do your research; read books and academic articles on your subject. Contact other departments to see what they have done. Empower yourself with knowledge and facts. Also, partner with an independent third party. Whether this is an academic researcher or a community group, have an entity outside of your organization to provide another perspective and voice. This other voice can tell you what you are possibly doing wrong (which is still good), but can also tell you what you are doing right and let everyone else know you’re doing it right too.