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In 2000, The United States Department of Justice (USDOJ), Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) collaborated to pilot an innovative post-police academy training strategy with the Reno, Nevada Police Department. This problem based learning strategy, titled the **Police Training Officer (PTO) Program**, institutionalized adult learning theory and problem solving tools into a process that encouraged new officers to think using a proactive mindset, enabling the identification of and solution to problems within their communities.

This approach created a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive law enforcement. Application of the PTO model provided the developmental opportunity for officers to internalize the concepts involved in police work, apply and retain knowledge learned in the academy, test and discover local best practices and problem solving techniques, as well as implement tactical enforcement strategies. The shift involved moving from the traditional, historically innovative, post-academy field training experience, which measured the new officer's skills against a set of performance guidelines, to a contemporary, problem based learning strategy.

The traditional approach utilized a Skinnerian-based training and learning model and the application of a Likert Scale to a daily observation report measuring behaviors against a checklist of standardized guidelines (of which community policing and problem solving strategies were merely guidelines among many upon which the officer was graded). It did not involve the community as a collaborative partner in determining solutions to local issues. The PTO model is based upon problem solving learning and adult teaching strategies, utilizing the principles of community policing at the very foundation of the post-academy experience.

This approach was conceptualized and developed by the USDOJ COPS Office in the effort to create a post-academy experience compatible with the principles of community policing and problem solving. It is based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains and places an emphasis on learning experiences that involve members of the community as partners in innovative problem solving. Additionally, these processes are easily tailored to

the unique needs of police organizations and the communities they serve. (More information can be referenced at www.cops.usdoj.gov [1].)

Following the completion of the PTO program design, the COPS Office successfully piloted the PTO model in six major police departments: Reno, Nevada; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Richmond, California. The COPS Office determined that since the pilots in 2000, it was appropriate to benchmark the national utilization of the PTO program.

To this end, in 2008, the COPS Office awarded a grant to the University of Illinois Center for Public Safety and Justice to conduct research to determine the level of understanding about, and utilization of, the Police Training Officer Program by law enforcement agencies across the country. The project would also identify the obstacles that prohibit the utilization of problem based learning and the implementation of the PTO model within police organizations. As best practices are developed with PTO programs across the country, they too would be captured during data collection.

Data Collection Strategies

Several data collection strategies are being employed to make this contemporary assessment. Strong university-based partnerships were forged during the development and administration of this project. They are referenced within this article so that interested readers might utilize them as resources in the enhancement of existing PTO programs or to assist in making the determination of whether to implement the PTO policing strategy.

A survey instrument was developed and is being administered at various national conferences (such as the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy Association, National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, Problem Oriented Policing, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police conferences). This survey is also hosted on a variety of law enforcement-related websites, distributed electronically via email, as well as through the traditional postal service. Follow-up telephone calls were also made to numerous police administrators to obtain additional qualitative data, thus enhancing the understanding of survey information.

In addition to demographic information, the survey seeks to ascertain information about: the familiarization with and implementation of the PTO post-academy training program; whether the traditional Field Training Officer (FTO) program is being utilized; knowledge of the difference between PTO and FTO post-academy training strategies; whether the PTO strategy was considered but determined unfeasible; barriers to PTO utilization; if utilizing the PTO program, would the strategy be recommended for other law enforcement organizations; and whether a national PTO Academy would be of interest to senior command who make training decisions for their organization.

While not yet mid-way through the two-year research project, preliminary findings reveal a number of significant trends. (Refer to the Graphical Analysis of PTO Survey Results.) Respondents indicated:

- A lack of awareness about the PTO post-academy training strategy, but were very interested in more information.
- Utilization of the traditional FTO model.
- A lack of understanding about the differences between PTO and FTO, which contributed to no plans to implement PTO.
- The perception that the PTO program involved too much paperwork.
- A concern that PTO orchestrated too much autonomy for new officers.
- For those using PTO and problem based learning strategies, the desire to implement problem based learning in other parts of the organization.
- For administrators considering the transformation to the PTO environment, contact of organizations utilizing the PTO model for guidance is beneficial.

Furthermore, survey responses reveal several barriers to the utilization of the PTO program exist, such as:

- a lack of knowledge about the PTO philosophy, adult learning approach, and program success on the part of senior command, management, trainers, and staff;
- a lack of community understanding or support for the PTO post-academy training program and how the utilization of creativity, collaboration, and sound problem solving techniques better the community;
- lack of funding for the migration from FTO to PTO;
- the perceived lack of program structure creating a lack of confidence in the process;
- a lack of training opportunities for senior command, management, and line staff;
- the development of a 'soft' or 'kind and gentle' officer; and
- that PTO is only for agencies wanting officers to respond autonomously and make sound decisions on their own. Survey and focus group respondents reported a preference for the officer who responds to a call, prescribes guidance, and serves as report takers, not an officer who collaborates with members of the community or utilizes its resources to solve problems.

These barriers and misperceptions, successes, and best practices were reiterated during a focus group workshop administered by the United States Department of Justice Kentucky Regional Community Policing Institute (RCPI) at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). Working collaboratively and complimenting the University of Illinois research project is Director Cindy Shain and her staff at the Kentucky RCPI, Southern Police Institute. They are developing and administering a USDOJ COPS Office National PTO Training Academy. Based on the survey, telephone, and focus group data, curricula is being developed to assist organizations in meeting PTO training and implementation needs. (For additional information, see their website at www.kycops.org [2].)

A compilation of data reveals the following information.

Strengths, successes and best practices reported include:

- recruits' knowledge, independent thinking, and problem solving skills were noted as dramatically increased;
- new officers are better able to handle the complexities of the job;
- PTO trainers are able to engage with the recruits in a positive, constructive manner rather than focusing exclusively on corrective behavior;
- issues requiring the termination of officers are identified earlier;
- many new officers self-terminate; and
- the PTO program is a community based strategy that encourages new officers to maintain an open mind and use creativity in an attempt to solve problems and develop viable solutions to problems and issues within the community.

Obstacles to and misperceptions of the PTO program included:

- difficulty in locating PTO training for staff;
- viewing the program as a less-disciplined way of training new officers;
- foreign terminology;
- budget constraints;
- viewed as an insult to the existing FTO training and training officers;
- a less structured, problem based learning style format which gave the trainee too much freedom over the training experience;
- ignorance about the program; and,
- an overall resistance to change.

Additional survey, telephone, and focus group anecdotal information is beneficial to understanding the PTO program.

Specialized Training Curriculum and Instructional Methods

Standardized training is essential within all levels of the organization including new officers, PTO supervisors, first and mid-line supervisors, as well as senior command. In addition to organizational policies and tactically-based curricula, topics presented within the problem based learning environment must include Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains, Emotional Intelligence, conflict resolution, and journaling. The additional utilization of these adult learning concepts throughout an organization's training strategies facilitates an understanding of one's self, one another as colleagues within the agency, as well as their external stakeholders with whom they collaborate and serve.

Program Implementation

Program implementation requires commitment throughout the organization, as well as the understanding that implementation requires a cultural change within the organization's policing strategies. Senior command must make clear their commitment to change and offer tools within the organization to best facilitate the migration from traditional post-academy training programs to the PTO process. In addition to the psychological preparation for change, a training foundation must be established for senior command and staff (typically a 40-hour course of instruction). Upon completion, all other agency personnel must participate in a learning process (such as courses of a shorter duration, roll-calls, and other means of communication) which identifies the specific, individual role they play in the PTO process. A critical element of the PTO program is the importance of understanding how the PTO model affects internal, as well as external stakeholders.

The National PTO Model

The National PTO model is regarded as positive by responding police command and staff, and adhering to its philosophy was touted as important for success of the program within their organizations. Using the core aspects of the prescribed model makes local adaptation feasible without corrupting the essence and characteristics that make the program uniquely affective. Modification to documentation, such as journaling strategies or placement of the integration week, allows the organization to more easily implement the PTO model within their organization's administrative and enforcement processes and culture. It was stressed that any attempt to simultaneously administer the PTO and more traditional field training officer's programs is ill-advised.

Conclusions to Date

The research project at the University of Illinois Center for Public Safety and Justice and the creation of the National PTO Academy at the University of Louisville RCPI, Southern Police Institute continues for months to come. However, whether data was collected using the survey instrument, follow-up calls, or from focus group participants, several themes stand out:

- New officers were better able to think creatively, act autonomously, and solve problems within their communities.
- New officers were empowered and demonstrated confidence immediately upon release from the PTO post-academy program.
- Officers frequently completed their duties going beyond the basics to follow-up with members of the community to continue a dialogue, identify and solve problems proactively, instilling community confidence in their local police department.
- There was a higher level of post-academy retention of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) as KSAs were internalized and instilled into long-term memory.
- Officers are empowered to ask questions and search for non-traditional solutions knowing they have the latitude to do so.
- PTO post-academy training turned out to serve as good leadership training.

While the migration from a traditional post-academy retaining program to the PTO strategy takes time and much concentrated effort, the outcomes are significant. Analysis of survey results, indicate a high level of interest in and support of this PTO program initiative; however, the need for clarification and explanations on the PTO program and implementation also emerged as an evident theme. The PTO initiative will facilitate the building of a foundation for life-long learning that prepares new officers for the complexities of policing in our ever evolving society.

Ultimately, the PTO program will result in better police services and community perception of their local law enforcement agencies.

For additional information, please contact Dr. Rushing at (877) 864-7427 or at prush1@uis.edu [3]. You are also encouraged to take the PTO Online Survey at <https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/1533224> [4].

Author



[Rushing Photo.jpg](#) [5]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov>

[2] <http://www.kycops.org>

[3] <mailto:prush1@uis.edu>

[4] <https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/1533224>

[5] <http://www.calea.org/sites/default/files/Rushing%20Photo.jpg>