Today's Records Management is Everyone's Business
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There is no doubt technology is the driving force of law enforcement today. Information led policing and the use of advanced software programs has been the approach for some time now. Yet with it has come an unintended and not always welcome byproduct that has led to trouble for some agencies. A level of scrutiny like never before of the information itself has created headlines resulting from allegations of manipulated crime statistics. The decrease in crime over the last several years has led to many audits as well as curious reporters on the hunt for discrepancies. With the advent of technology, including police reports that are obtainable on-line, our numbers are everywhere. Welcome to the world of police records management– the latest liability monkey in law enforcement.
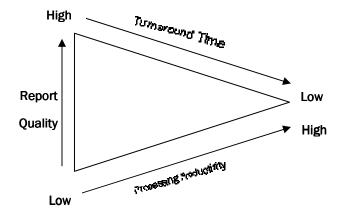
In 2004 the Broward Sheriff's Office was tarnished with highly publicized incidents of cooking the books. In 2007, the integrity of Chief Timoney and the Miami Police Department were publicly called into question because of allegations that their crime stats were routinely altered. While the Miami Police Department was cleared after an investigation, several detectives and supervisors were arrested in the Broward case.

Why then does law enforcement often not have measures in place to prevent discrepancies, errors, or even downright manipulation such as cooking the books? Are we failing in the proper use of all this great technology? Are we not truly embracing accountability? Are we neglecting to properly manage our records management functions or to supervise those who work in these areas? The answer is probably yes to all of the above.

Advancement of law enforcement technology calls for a change in the way we do business. Computers in and of themselves are not the solution for problematic records management or information sharing shortcomings. Without holistic approaches to improving these ever important issues, technology alone cannot solve the ills that

countless agencies face in their records sections. How many times have records been lost despite having the latest and greatest programs? How many clerks have underperformed because of a lack of direction, leadership, and training? How many employees have been transferred to "Records" because there simply was "no other place to put them"? If your records are not managed properly or your officers do not receive training in report writing 2009 style, then plan on someday reading about your agency in the paper.

Agencies should have internal checks and balances and one singular body that is the ultimate authority on the proper collection, processing, maintenance, and dissemination of reports. No longer are records personnel just considered clerical support but rather well trained technology savvy employees who are empowered to closely analyze and approve or disapprove of agency records. These personnel are the ones who conduct research and submit statistical information to the FBI, the media, and the public. The advancement of technology and today's focus on numbers demands that they are trained not only in UCR but also in the same criminal laws that the officers are.

There are three components to ensuring the records unit is operating efficiently: 1) good report writing 2) sound records management practices and 3) maximizing the use of available technology. These key components will help to ensure your agency produces accurate information which is designed to keep the public informed, meet the regulations of the UCR program, and provide an ever so important gauge of how well the department is doing its job.

Creating a sound records management program begins with producing valid police reports. Aside from proper grammar, punctuation, and prose, reports should be clear, concise, and written as if telling a story using only the facts as the plot. Most importantly, reports should be classified correctly to accurately reflect the crime that occurred. If reports fall short in any of these areas the judges, attorneys, and citizens that read them will naturally call into question the level of professionalism of the agency as a whole. Report writing training should occur on an annual basis as should report review training for supervisors. This brings consistency to the review process which when absent means reports will not be equally scrutinized, a phenomenon which also affects statistical accuracy.

5 steps to lower mistakes and raise the quality of reports:

1) Training

Annual report writing training should teach users how to write well written police reports as well as how to use the agency's computers and software to do so.

2) Manual

Draft a report writing manual specific to agency protocol and software including a listing of commonly made mistakes, specific report examples, and narrative requirements.

3) The "Corrections List"

Publish a monthly "Report Correction List" which includes a listing of reports found by records personnel containing errors even after supervisory review. Include the respective officers and reviewing supervisors names for everyone to see.

4) Report Advisories

Publish Report Advisories via email informing personnel of any reoccurring problems with reports in order to ensure officers are kept informed as their schedules change.

5) Computer Committee

Regularly convene your agency's technology savvy/report writing experts to resolve report writing concerns and any ongoing computer problems or projects.

The 2009 Police Records Section

The second stage of creating a solid records management program is to make sure the records unit is operating like a business. Identify the measures of progress, performance standards, and customer service issues in your records section and then conduct an operational analysis to determine how they are functioning. How long is it taking for reports to become available to the public? How are reports getting corrected? How much time is spent on data processing and data entry?

Gone are the days of records clerks who were only tasked with typing in reports, making copies, filing, and distributing the mail. Today clerks must be proficient in the use of advanced software programs and have in-depth knowledge of complicated UCR rules and criminal law. Furthermore the notion that records management systems and field reporting software makes the job of records management easier is somewhat misleading. While collecting, maintaining, and querying information is far more efficient, processing the data requires a skill set beyond what has typically been required. Records staff must be trained in computer skills, research, and statistical analysis. They must be empowered, entrusted, and held accountable to produce accurate and timely information on behalf of the department. And yes, they should be thoroughly reviewing every police report that your department produces!

Leadership, Training, and Participative Management

The problems that are typically found in records units require the leadership of someone capable of implementing methodical, deliberate, and unwavering advancement at the policy, administrative, and operational levels. Such a person must demonstrate the majority of leadership skills including patience, fairness, firmness, integrity, trust, loyalty, support, and confidence. The records supervisor is charged with producing accurate crime statistics, ensuring the department is compliant with various legal requirements, and managing employees during a time of change.

Training is paramount to most other efforts at change. Not only should records clerks receive training in public records law, criminal law, and UCR regulations, but so should officers, detectives, and supervisors. Ask your officers in roll call if they know what UCR is. The fact that some will indicate they have no idea is a testament to the need for training in this area. How can an officer go through an entire police academy and never receive even an hour in the classroom on UCR? While some agencies have taken the stance that officers should not be concerned with UCR, others have embraced the idea of educating them on this topic. Ignoring the significance it has in law enforcement is to deny an officer knowledge in one of the most fundamental aspects of his or her profession- measurements of crime.

Furthermore, how can agencies work towards bridging the gap that exists between state statutes and UCR rules if sworn personnel don't learn about UCR? Officers need a basic understanding of UCR just as records clerks need to know certain criminal statutes. Turn to your state's regulating body that governs public records management for guidance. In Florida for example, the Department of State maintains a comprehensive website and training program for records personnel at http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/.

Finally, successful change is only possible by involving your employees. In records where management decisions are not of the critical incident type, participative management is most appropriate. Involve your employees in drafting changes to policies or manuals in their respective areas of expertise. Assign projects that are commensurate with their abilities and guide them through to fruition.

Maximizing the Use of Technology

Lastly, building a records management program requires maximizing the use of available technologies. If you don't have a records management and mobile field reporting system in place then it's time to get one. Procuring such technology is no doubt a big project but one that must be undertaken. Utilize free resources offered by the International Association of Chief's of Police and the Law Enforcement Information Technology Standards Council for guidance. If you already have these systems in place then determine if they are being utilized to their fullest capabilities.

Some systems for example allow you to export data to spreadsheets for further organization, publish crime reports on the internet, and keep track of how long it is taking for reports to get approved.

Now that you have an understanding of the importance of police records management, work towards to keeping your agency out of the headlines and on the path to producing accurate and compliant information. No matter what the root cause is of any incident of statistical manipulation, it should never occur. Even if there is extreme pressure from above to bring crime stats down one should not use it as an excuse for illegal behavior. Remember just what it is we represent and work towards moving your agency forward ethically, legally, and proudly!