



NATIONAL FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE

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FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE

Policy Paper on the Recruitment and Retention Crisis in Law Enforcement

FRAMING THE ISSUE

The Fraternal Order of Police has always been committed to improving our profession, the working conditions of law enforcement officers, and the safety of those we serve through education, legislation, information, community involvement, and employee representation. In recent years, the law enforcement profession has been facing a real crisis in our ability to recruit and retain officers with the abilities, character, and integrity to do a very difficult and increasingly dangerous job.

There are many professions that are facing similar difficulties, but many of the reasons retaining veteran officers and hiring quality candidates are so challenging are unique to law enforcement. Our profession has become more dangerous and benefits—like good salaries and benefits like pensions and healthcare coverage after retirement—are no longer as attractive or competitive to the new generation. One major factor among veteran officers is the perception that elected officials and police executives no longer support, respect, or appreciate the officers serving in their communities. Prosecutors who have placed social justice ahead of public safety or refuse to keep dangerous criminals who have multiple, serious charges or charges of violence in jail before trial—or even refuse to prosecute certain criminals—have left officers feeling like their work is without value and that they are risking their lives needlessly.

The new generations of working adults have very different mindsets when it comes to public service. Young people, for whom a healthy work/life balance is critical, may perceive that a career in policing may not meet their expectations.

These challenges are not new. The FOP worked cooperatively with the Trump Administration and the Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and the Advancement of Justice. Chapter 15 of the [Commission's final report](#) has recommendations on how to recruit qualified applicants, provide sufficient and ongoing training for officers, and retain officers within their agencies. These recommendations include establishing a federal program to provide a “comprehensive education benefit” for individuals that choose a law enforcement career, improved marketing of policing careers, and the use of recruitment and retention incentives.

More recently, President Biden issued [Executive Order 14074](#), *Advancing Effective, Accountable Policing and Criminal Justice Practices to Enhance Public Trust and Public Safety*, which commits to finding “new practices in law enforcement recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention, as well as training, oversight, and accountability.” Section 3 of the Executive Order is entitled: “Strengthening Officer Recruitment, Hiring, Promotion, and Retention Practices,” and

directs Federal officials to develop “a set of core policies and best practices” “regarding recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention, while also identifying any agency-specific unique recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention challenges.”

This policy paper is the product of a Roundtable on Law Enforcement Recruiting and Retention convened by the National Fraternal Order of Police in April 2023. This is a working document that provides the perspective of the rank-and-file officer on this critical issue. The best recruiters and advocates for our noble profession are the rank-and-file officers as these brave men and women on the front lines and have the most direct interaction with members of the public. Each of them works every day to keep their neighborhoods safe and maintain the trust and respect that must exist if our neighborhoods are to remain safe.

More than 80 FOP leaders from every region of the country came to Washington, D.C. to participate in this Roundtable to share their view on this critical issue. The FOP developed a survey—designed for the event’s participants—to provide a snapshot of the rank-and-file’s perspective on the nationwide shortage of officers. The [results of the survey](#) showed that, on average, agencies represented at this roundtable were down 18% of their authorized force strength. Agencies cannot fulfill the public safety which is having a negative impact on public safety across the board. These agencies lost more than 4,700 officers recently—nearly 2,800 to retirement, more than 1,200 who left for a different law enforcement agency, and 704 who left the profession altogether.

The challenges are real and the crisis is real—but it is not unsolvable. The FOP will lead the way in addressing this issue, just as we always have, and will work cooperatively with the Federal government to secure resources and funding to meet these challenges, with State and local governments to keep and find the best officers for their agencies, with our fellow law enforcement organizations, and, most importantly, with our communities and their citizens.

FINDING SOLUTIONS: *Is Retention Our Biggest Problem?*

- **Good leadership makes for good organizations.**

Agencies with active and engaged leadership are more likely to have their officers stay and serve. Leaders who are advocates for public safety, who demonstrate support and appreciation for their officers, and who are committed to officer safety and wellness help contribute to an organization that officers are proud to serve. These officers, who believe their work and sacrifice is acknowledged and appreciated, are much less likely to seek employment in another agency or to leave the profession. In fact, good agencies with good leadership are attractive to new hires and veteran officers alike.

Agencies without good leaders will lose good officers to other agencies. The leading reason that officers leave is the reputation of their agency. Agencies who are negatively viewed by the community or are the target of negative publicity are more likely to lose their veteran officers to other organizations. The key to agency culture are the frontline supervisors, who must be good leaders who lead by example and support the rank-and-file.

Organizations that promote from within are also better at retaining officers, who may want to advance in rank or role within the agency, and also create a culture of trust.

Unions or similar employee organizations that hold “no confidence” votes in their mayors, councils, chiefs, or sheriffs should be considered seriously. The results of these votes should serve as a basis for community action and organizational change.

Leadership training for police executives and for union leaders will improve agency culture, officer morale, and increase retention of veteran officers.

- **Unions give officers a voice.**

Officers who are members of a labor union or similar representative organizations feel they have a voice within their agency. Unions that partner with their agencies’ leadership have a positive impact on morale and job satisfaction. Officers represented by an active and well-led union are more likely to remain with their agency.

Congress and/or State legislatures should recognize the right of law enforcement officers to bargain collectively. Contracts that result from good faith negotiations between employers and officers give officers a sense of purpose and standing within the community and the agency.

Agencies and jurisdictions that resist recognizing those rights—or worse try to take them away—will greatly accelerate the departures of veteran officers. As an example, the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) has lost more than 1,000 officers in the last three years—and those officers are reporting that a lack of respect from the D.C. Council and new laws stripping away their bargaining rights are the top reasons they are leaving MPD.

We also need to identify why officers depart their agency. Are they retiring early, moving to a different agency, or leaving the profession? Agencies or the employee union or representative organization should work to understand why officers leave the agency before full retirement by conducting exit interviews, which may shed light on what is driving the decisions of officers who leave.

- **Pay and benefits matter.**

Competitive wages, access to healthcare, and secure retirement plans all contribute to keeping veteran officers. Continuing education, access to childcare, loan forgiveness, housing assistance programs, and access to physical and mental health services also incentivize officers to remain with the agency. Agencies must fully educate their officers on the scope and impact their benefits will have as they near retirement.

Retention bonuses as a one-time incentive do not seem to be working, but agencies that have well-thought-out programs structured to provide incentives over time or that reward longer service are working. One example that was discussed was to provide salary increases at 15 and 20 years of service to provide incentives for the officer to serve a full 25 or 30 years.

Creative scheduling and shift models can also contribute to an officer’s decision to continue to serve if it improves their work/life balance. Four days on duty and four days

leave was one example. These “off days,” however, should be fully off-duty time and not be subject to cancellation (barring emergencies) or be used as court appearance days.

Officers in agencies that provide good, working equipment are also more likely to be retained. When officers have to use equipment that is old and unreliable—vehicles, soft body armor, body-worn cameras, conducted energy weapons (Tasers)—it sends the message that officer safety and performance is not a priority. Officers are less likely to remain in these agencies.

Agencies that have embraced a culture of wellness and that have disciplinary procedures that are corrective and not punitive are also more likely to retain officers.

Congress, as well as State and local legislatures, should focus on providing law enforcement agencies with resources to support agency efforts to increase retention.

RECRUITING THE NEXT GENERATION: *Making Policing an Attractive Profession*

- **Rank-and-file members are the best advocates for our profession.**

Officers that are happy and successful in their agency help attract and keep high quality candidates. Unions or similar representative organizations should work with agency and community leaders to develop a “profile” of what a good and successful officer is for the community they will serve. While pay and benefits are a factor, successful recruiters have reported that an active union or similar organization was a critical “selling point” because recruits understood they would have a voice and an advocate within the agency.

Leadership and reputation are also important to recruitment. Candidates are not going to work for a police executive that will not support them or for an agency that is poorly viewed by the community.

The hiring process should be thorough, but steps should be taken to reduce the timeline from completing the application to the first day on the job.

- **Maintain or raise duty-fitness standards.**

Agencies should not lower standards for candidates when it comes to moral fitness, integrity, and high character. Full and thorough background checks and, when needed, psychological exams, should always be conducted. Lowering standards leaves the door open to men and women who will not be good and successful officers.

Agencies may consider relaxing standards with respect to physical appearance—tattoos, facial hair, and the like. Agencies should also reconsider excluding candidates from consideration based only on age, but no standard that would impact physical or mental fitness for duty should be considered.

- **National marketing campaigns and recruitment drives are needed.**

Congress, working with organizations like the FOP, should partner with the Ad Council to promote the profession of law enforcement nationwide. Congress should provide more

flexible funding to State and local agencies, not just to hire and retain officers, but to conduct marketing campaigns and recruitment drives.

Agencies should look to have a department that looks like the community they protect. Diversity is important, but officers should be drawn from the community and have roots in the community when possible.

Agencies and communities should celebrate and market their successes. Law enforcement should be seen as a helping profession, emphasizing “soft skills,” and a commitment to public service.

- **Recruit where the candidates are and create young people a path to policing.**

Agencies should consider partnering with the U.S. Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to identify and recruit members leaving the armed services. The DoD can build promotional material into their transitional processes and the VA can provide information about agencies that are hiring. A hiring application kit could be standardized for veterans, which would expedite their consideration. Agencies running recruitment drives should advertise in military publications and military bases.

Young people have a different idea of what a healthy work/life balance is, and marketing campaigns and recruitment drives need to reflect that. The age and outlook for the recruiters should be accounted for—young people will want to hear from officers like them. Social media can help humanize officers and demonstrate the public service nature of the profession and to connect with potential candidates.

Similar to retention efforts, creative scheduling and shift models can make a career in policing attractive to young people who are seeking a good work/life balance.

Agencies should consider creating non-sworn positions like “community service officers” with young people potentially interested in policing as a career. These officers would respond to abandoned cars, minor traffic accidents, and similar calls for service that do not require a sworn officer. These young officers would also be provided with training to keep them on a path to policing.

Provide young people with a chance to see what law enforcement careers can be like through the Police Explorers and Cadet Program. Agencies can partner with area schools to promote these programs and participate in career days to educate students about the benefits of a career in policing. Agencies can also connect with their community and potential recruits using specialized units like K9s, horse patrols, and bike patrols to generate interest in policing.

The FOP is also developing an apprenticeship program similar to those that exist in other trades.

- **Pay and benefits matter.**

Competitive wages, access to healthcare, and secure retirement plans will help agencies find new recruits. Continuing education benefits, loan forgiveness programs, and housing assistance can help make the agency and a policing career attractive. Access to

childcare, as well as physical and mental health services, also incentivize officers to choose to be an officer with the agency. Agency recruiters must be clear and articulate all the benefits that a career in policing will provide.

Congress, as well as State and local legislatures, should focus on providing law enforcement agencies with resources to support agency efforts to increase recruitment.