

# Take-Home Vehicle Program

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## **Abstract**

*Administrators find themselves having to justify take-home vehicle programs that sometimes do not have fiscal budgetary savings, but rather are preventative in ways that cannot be measured monetarily. A take-home vehicle program is a significant expenditure item for a department and a cost/benefit analysis should be done. This research concludes that take-home vehicles are widely used in the law enforcement community as a means of ensuring a rapid response, deterring crime and enhancing employee benefits. A take-home vehicle program should be guided by a policy that articulates all requirements for officers using take-home vehicles including what level of personal use is allowed for members operating take-home vehicles.*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of a take-home vehicle program is to provide a police presence in the employee's community. This includes the ability to quickly respond to emergencies from multiple areas within a jurisdiction and the potential to save money on vehicle maintenance and repair. Finally, it can be a positive incentive within a hiring process.

Take-home vehicle programs are currently in operation throughout the United States and these programs allow sworn and non-sworn police personnel to travel to and from home and work. In the Criminal Justice Agency Profile Report 2010 by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, it was reported that of the 355 Law Enforcement agencies across the state, 313 have take-home vehicle programs. This is an 88% usage rate of a take-home vehicle program within the state. Even with only allowing an officer to use the vehicle to and from work suggests that a take-home vehicle program has become an employee benefit.

Lieutenant Brian Donaldson of the Tallahassee Police Department (2009) within his research paper suggests, "It is important to look at options that allow law enforcement agencies to reduce fuel consumption and overall vehicle operational costs without significantly reducing police service." (p. 1) The perception of rising fuel cost by citizens usually results in the media "bashing" of government entities as evident in a *Gainesville Sun* article (Smith, 2011), "a practice that has drawn scrutiny nationwide as gas prices have risen and budgets have shrunk." Fuel cost is always in the forefront of expenditures with transportation and establishing a budget for both government agencies and private sector businesses. Fuel consumption should never be a deciding factor in how law enforcement agencies serve their communities and respond to emergencies. A law enforcement agency's responsibility is to prevent crime and such action cannot be done without transportation. The take-home vehicle program should be used by law enforcement agencies because it is one more way to provide service and protection within the community. This study examined prior research and assessed

how a take-home vehicle program affects an agency's accountability for the use of their community's tax dollars.

### **Literature Review**

In an article in the *Gainesville Sun* the writer comments, "Many of these vehicles also are driven home by the employees – a practice that has drawn scrutiny nationwide as gas prices have risen and budgets have shrunk." (Smith, C., 2011) His comment is true with the continual struggle of the economic crises within the United States and the budgetary cuts on the state and local levels. A take-home vehicle program sometimes has a negative aspect and the use of law enforcement marked vehicles stands out in the public eye. Officer's actions and their misuse of a take-home vehicle have a huge deciding influence on a take-home program. "A Miami-Dade, Fla., police officer has been relieved of duty, after a local television station aired video showing her hauling mattresses on top of her marked patrol unit." ("Fla. Officer Reprimanded for Hauling Mattresses On Cruiser," 2012) The take-home vehicle program is a benefit for officers and they need to be strongly aware of its use.

Another article in the *Palm Beach Post* by J. Kennedy (2011), addresses the economic crises in the state of Florida and it's shortfall for tax revenue for 2012. The possibility of a billion dollar state budget cut will have a "trickling" effect upon the local governments with the possibility of the elimination of state-backed programs. Large amounts of the state funding to county and municipal governments exist in grant-funded programs. These grant-funded programs range from the purchase of small equipment for enforcement purposes to positions/salaries for sworn officers. Most agencies constantly struggle with budgetary cuts and try to avoid those cuts that affect the benefits to employees or cause the termination of positions. Vehicle take-home programs are often scrutinized by the public and may become a target for budgetary plans. Administrations find themselves having to defend and justify a program that sometimes does not have a fiscal budgetary savings but rather a preventative action that cannot be measured monetarily. However, like any other benefit, an agency must determine exactly what costs are involved and be ready to justify them.

Poor budgetary planning for potential fuel cost rise will have a rippling effect upon future planning of any government budget. Sometimes fuel costs take a turn in the opposite direction. Donaldson (2009) sites, "In March 2008, the average cost of retail gasoline in the United States reached an all-time high of \$4.05 a gallon. This is nearly a 30% increase from the year before when gas was averaging \$2.93 a gallon (Energy Information Administration, 2009). For law enforcement agencies across the country, this dramatic increase has led to emergency budget reviews, cuts, and immediate changes in policies and vehicle purchasing." (p. 1) In March 2012, the average cost of retail gasoline in the United States was \$3.86 a gallon. (Energy Information Administration, 2012) This is a 19-cent decrease in the average cost of gasoline per gallon since Donaldson's research. In July 2012, the average cost of retail gasoline in Florida was \$3.47 a gallon. (Energy Information Administration, 2012) This is a 49-cent lower state average cost compared to the national average cost of gasoline per gallon since Donaldson's research.

The miles an officer drives during any work period is unpredictable, which makes budgeting fuel costs difficult. One day, an officer may drive 100 miles, and the next day, he or she may drive 200 miles to the calls for service. When looking at the fuel cost equation, one may suggest knowing the cost for the officer driving to and from their home could be a deciding factor. However, this is also an unpredictable variable because the location of the officer when leaving will change every day based on their final call for service and/or the district in which they work. There are too many variables in fuel cost to use it as a reason to abolish or establish a take-home vehicle program.

B. Nash of the Fraternal Order of Police research section (1995) comments, "Take-home car plans have their down sides, too. From a political standpoint, they give your chief, city manager, mayor, city council members, state representative and the like a very powerful bargaining chip that many use shamelessly." (p. 3) Nash's research does not offer any examples of government entities using the take-home vehicle program as a bargaining chip. Within the law enforcement community, most agency administrations seek advice and/or support from other governing bodies or official associations when trying to make administrative decisions for their agency. In a U.S. Department of Justice guide for school resource programs (e.g., Finn P., Townsend M., Shively M., Rich T., & Aby Associates Inc.) it is suggested that as an additional incentive for school resource officers, an agency should offer a take-home vehicle. In the International Association of Chiefs of Police Research Center Directorate (2007) it states, "Implementation of a take-home cruiser program can have potential benefits for the officer, the agency, and the community." Although these entities may not be an agency's governing body, they have an impact upon the decision making of any agency's administration. There is a lack of evidence and research to either support or refute Nash's bold statement; however, it is included here to show one of the potential downsides to a take-home vehicle program.

There are a number of significant benefits to an agency, employees, and the public in a take-home vehicle program. Most agencies are very budget-conscious and try to avoid making cuts that affect positions or employee benefits. Budgetary cuts also affect the hiring process of some agencies. Within the research paper by B. Hager (2008) *New Recruits: What Factors Decide Their Choice of an Employing Agency?* Hager states, "Law enforcement agencies across the nation are experiencing the challenge of recruiting qualified applicants to fill vacancies. There are a variety of reasons why qualified recruits are scarce." In a *PoliceOne.com* article by J. LeSage (2005), he examines the reasons why qualified recruits are hard to find. LeSage recognizes two areas of concern: first, most recruitment processes are lengthy and demanding which could be a discouragement towards potential employees and second, the recruitment pool is limited by the standards required for law enforcement and agencies have to find people with a relatively unblemished background. Shift work plays a big part in the new generation's decision making and has a negative appeal because they are motivated by spending time with family and friends and not willing to work odd shift hours or weekends. Hager's research found that the most important reason younger officers gave for selecting the agency they were with was benefits such as insurance and a retirement plan, with a 71% rating. This was followed by the department's reputation with a 50% rating. A take-home car and a cell phone were selected by 47% and salary was selected by 46%. (Hager, 2008) In *Using Visual*

*Technology for Recruitment* by Ellis, Marshall, Skinner and Smith (2005) they examined recruitment methods for the future. They found that new recruits coming from generation X that are known to be technology savvy, and future recruiting needs to incorporate emerging technology to get their targeted audience. In order to continue to be a competitive police agency, agencies will need to use emerging technologies, such as the Internet, as a recruitment tool. International Association of Chiefs of Police Research Center Directorate (2007) states, "Recruiting tool – Take-home vehicles are a positive recruiting mechanism in a competitive market." The lack of benefits reduces the pool of selection and forces an agency to hire substandard employees. Using a take-home vehicle program can have positive results in a hiring process for any agency, such as attracting more qualified applicants and encouraging new hires to consider a long-term career with an agency.

The City of Tacoma, Washington used the outside consulting firm of Mercury Associates and it compiled a comprehensive study regarding take-home vehicles. In the *Cost-benefit analysis of Tacoma's assigned vehicle program* by D. Lauria (2007), the research found that operating costs per mile were 30% lower for take-home vehicles than that of fleet vehicles. Lauria's research showed that each officer had an average of three 'contacts' per month on his or her way to or from work while off-duty and that each officer was called out to service while off-duty an average of four times per month. Laurie's *Spreadsheet Model For CB Analysis* (Annex C) sites that the City of Tacoma repair cost for a take-home vehicle is \$.012/year per \$1 of initial vehicle cost (\$27,000) and the fleet vehicle repair cost is \$.0132/year per \$1 of initial vehicle cost (\$27,000). The spreadsheet also gives the maintenance cost for their take-home vehicle as \$290 per month (\$3,490 per year) and the fleet vehicle maintenance cost is \$580 per month (\$6,960 per year). Tacoma Police Department has 264 vehicles for their take-home vehicle program, based on these formulas given fleet vehicles averaged \$7,316 in maintenance and repair costs per year, while a take-home vehicle was \$3,814 per year. Lauria looked at Tacoma's average response time and found that it was just less than 10 minutes. The average response times from one district to another were small, ranging from a low of 8.5 minutes to a high of about 13 minutes. Within Laura's research, he conducted a neighborhood questionnaire along with a survey to all of Tacoma's neighborhood councils regarding take-home vehicles. The questionnaire asked if officers should have take-home or fleet vehicles and the responses showed that 16% said they were opposed to a take-home vehicle program and 84% said that both the officers and the city could benefit with a take-home vehicle program. The responses from the surveys indicated that the citizens believed that the two most important benefits of an assigned take-home vehicle program were quicker response and to deter crime. His conclusion suggested that the way the Tacoma Police Department allocated its personnel and vehicles resulted in a generally high level of service to the city and that no district seemed to be under or over served.

Manatee County Sheriff's Office, Manatee, FL requested of Comptroller Tom Salisbury, the cost benefit of having assigned vehicles versus utilizing pool vehicles. Using the agency's available fleet data, Salisbury was able to provide cost data as it related to the Manatee County Sheriff's Office. In the *Memorandum: Assigned Vehicle Costs* by T. Salisbury (2007), Salisbury's analysis calculated a useful life of a vehicle at 90,000 miles. Within his research, Salisbury took into consideration useful life, vehicle

replacement value, salvage values, mileage and fuel costs, maintenance, and lost officer productivity for fleet vehicles. Salisbury determined that fleet vehicle costs ranged from 64 to 74 cents per mile and a take-home vehicle program had a 56 cent per mile cost. Salisbury's data also showed that the maintenance costs for a fleet vehicle would be \$21,297 and the maintenance cost for one of their take-home vehicles was \$12,285. The Manatee County Sheriff's Office had a take-home vehicle program at the time of Salisbury's study but he did not provide information on how he obtained the cost information for the fleet vehicles. Salisbury was able to show that there was a higher cost associated with a fleet program when compared to a take-home vehicle program.

The City of Cape Coral hired South West Florida Center for Public and Social Policy from Florida Gulf Coast University to analyze the Cape Coral Police Department's take-home vehicle program. Smith and Banyan (2010) looked at per mile maintenance and fuel costs, parking costs, officer time to equip vehicle and replacement cost minus salvage value of the vehicle. In the area of maintenance and fuel costs they provided a comparison of the mileage and operating costs. Their study included 264 vehicles and the data indicated that a pool vehicle program would cost between 4 and 10 cents per mile more than a take-home vehicle program. In the area of officer lost time to equip their vehicle they used sworn and unsworn personnel who would share a vehicle, using their average annual salary of \$93,356 (\$44.88/hour). Smith and Banyan used lost productivity estimates from other studies and determined an officer lost time was between .47 and .67 hours per day. The lost productivity per officer was calculated as number of hour's lost / day number of days/year average hourly rate. They used evidence-based estimates for the time spent in equipping vehicles and was based on the City of Tacoma research by Lauria (2007) and Manatee County Sheriff's Office by Salisbury (2007). Smith and Banyan (2010) concluded, "that the more an agency pools its vehicles, the greater the cost. This is primarily a factor of low number of personal miles driven, higher costs of maintenance and repair, pooled vehicle parking, and officer salaries relative to the cost of a vehicle."

## **Method**

To determine if take-home vehicle programs are beneficial and to understand the associated budgetary issues, each represented agency of the class members of the FDLE Senior Leadership Program class No. 15 was invited to participate in the survey. The survey was an internet-based survey and the full text of the survey is available in appendix A. Each participant was invited by email with a web-link to the survey. This type of survey had no cost and was convenient for each individual taking the survey. The survey consisted of eleven (11) yes or no type questions and four (4) multiple choice questions, two of which allowed for an explanation for the answer provided.

## Results

Out of the 32 surveys sent out, there were 26 responses with an 81% return rate. The first survey question was asked to determine who had a take-home vehicle program and if not, the reason for not having a program. Eighty percent of the agencies have take-home vehicle programs. Two respondents said there was no take-home vehicle program at their agency and offered the following reasons:

1. Corrections – Vehicles only utilized for inmate transport.
2. Funding

Questions two through four were directed at the restrictions for the use of the vehicles for who, traveled distance and personal use. Eighty-one percent of the agencies allow all of their officers to have a take-home vehicle. Of the eighty-one percent, 61.9% do not allow their officers to use the vehicles for personal use and 71.4% have a limit on how far the vehicle may be driven.

Question five and six dealt with misuse and policy. Every agency that has a take-home vehicle program said there is a departmental policy covering the take-home vehicle program. When asked within the last five years how many officers have been disciplined for misuse, one respondent had no disciplinary action on any officer; fifty-seven percent said they had 1 to 5 officers disciplined, 14.3% had 6 to 10 officers disciplined, 14.3% had 11 to 20 officers disciplined and no one had over 21 officers disciplined.

Questions seven through nine were directed at the external factors of a take-home vehicle program. Eighty-five percent of the agencies said they use the take-home vehicle program as a recruiting tool for new hires. Fifty-two percent of the agencies members are under a collective bargaining unit and only 66.7% of those agencies include the take-home vehicle program within collective bargaining agreement (Contract).

Questions 10 through 13 addressed the internal factors within the agency and governing body of their agencies. Only 63.2% of the agencies keep separate data on the miles traveled for each vehicle while on duty. Seventy-one percent of the agencies keep separate data on the miles traveled while off duty. Over the last five years, 13 agencies have had to justify their take-home vehicle program and eight of them had to justify the program each year. Fuel cost was 90.9% of the needed justifications, maintenance accounted for 45.5% and improper use had 27.3% reason for justification. Seven other agencies gave other reasons as follows:

- Overall – Fiscal Responsibility
- Cost
- Does the program really benefit the city?
- Budget
- Having use of it allows Public Safety personnel rapid response to the community we serve.
- In accordance with Florida law, all state agencies must conduct and annual vehicle utilization audit.

Each agency was asked what percentage of their annual budget is for fuel cost:

- 52% of the agencies budgets - Fuel accounted for 1% to 3%
- 24% of the agencies budgets – Fuel accounted for 4% to 6%
- 20% of the agencies budgets – Fuel accounted for 7% to 9%
- 4% of the agencies budgets – Fuel accounted for 10% to 12%

All agencies were asked if they thought the take-home vehicle program was beneficial to their community and all but one answered yes. Respondents to the survey included four Department of Correction agencies and these agencies do not operate under a patrol function. This might account for why they do not believe that the take-home vehicle program would be beneficial to their community.

## Discussion

In this analysis, several studies were consulted for this paper; each study contained analysis of the benefits and costs associated with a take-home vehicle program. With 96% of the surveyed agencies saying they feel a take-home vehicle program is beneficial to their community shows there is little or no controversy within the departments. Research shows that take-home vehicle programs increase the opportunity for officer contacts, rapid deployment, and availability of personnel to quickly respond. Within the extensive researches by D. Lauria (2007) for Tacoma, Washington, and Smith and Banyan (2010) for Cape Coral, Florida, the following advantages were evident for take-home vehicles:

- Rapid response to emergency call outs.
- Vehicles last longer than fleet cars due to better maintenance and care.
- Time saved without having to check and move around personal equipment.
- Increase police visibility.
- Major selling point in recruiting.
- Increase officers' morale and enhance their overall professional image.
- Saves government money in the long run.
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The take-home vehicle program, like a personally owned vehicle, gives officers the responsibility of maintaining their patrol cars and equipment; giving them ownership and resulting in better treatment of the vehicles. Officers will have greater tendency to frequently check tire pressure, fluids, oils and other equipment (i.e., light bars and sirens). Mechanical problems will receive immediate attention because the officer would fear losing the use of the vehicle to and from work and being forced to use their personal vehicle. There is a long-term savings for maintenance costs when using a take-home vehicle program, which is always a positive selling point for an agency's budget. Not only does an agency have a constitutional responsibility of protecting the citizens within their community, but they all have this responsibility as their mission and departmental goal. Giving the community peace of mind by knowing that their law

enforcement agency can quickly respond to their immediate needs should be the greatest determining factor of using a take-home vehicle program.

### **Recommendations**

All agencies should conduct studies to examine capital outlay, resale value of retiring cars, fuel cost, officer morale and commuting mileage (on and off duty) when determining the value of a take-home vehicle program. Such research will provide a strong foundation for justifying the initial start-up and the continued use of a take-home vehicle program. Hopefully, research will provide evidence that take-home programs improve the working conditions and job performance of police officers. Once a program has been started, every agency needs to be vigilant in the management of the use of the vehicles and discipline officers who abuse or neglect their vehicles. Take-home vehicles allow for all sworn officers to respond where needed, when needed. The key areas that need to be examined are vehicle life, life cycle mileage, vehicle cost, salvage, maintenance, fuel cost and lost duty time. Morale of officers, public opinion, and recruiting tools should be supporting justification to the cost of a program. For an unbiased opinion, agencies should use an outside consulting firm to conduct research to determine the benefits and costs of a take-home vehicle program. Regardless of research and studies outcome, the bottom goal is to be good stewards of finances for the community.

Lieutenant Billy Woods has been in law enforcement for over 22 years with the Ocala Police Department. He has taken many roles within the agency to include road patrol, drug task force, motorcycle officer and traffic homicide investigator. His supervisor role has included road patrol, traffic unit and is currently a watch commander on the road.



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## Appendix A

1. Does your agency have a take-home vehicle program?
2. Are all officers allowed to take-home a department vehicle?
3. Is there a limit on how far the vehicle may be driven?
4. May vehicles be used for personal use when the officer is not on duty?
5. Within the last five years, how many officers have been disciplined for misuse of their take-home vehicle while off duty?
6. Does your department have a policy for take-home vehicles?
7. Does your agency use the take-home vehicle program as a benefit when recruiting new hires?
8. Are the members of your agency under a collective bargaining unit (union)?
9. Does your collective bargaining agreement (Contract) include a take-home vehicle program?
10. Does your agency keep separate data on the miles traveled for each vehicle while on duty?
11. Does your agency keep separate data on the miles traveled while off duty?

12. Within the last five years, how many times has your agency head had to justify within his or her budget each year the take-home vehicles to each respective City Council, City Manager or County Commission?
13. What was the reason for the needed justifications?
14. Do you think a take-home vehicle program is beneficial to your community?
15. What percentage of your annual budget is for fuel cost?