

The Struggle: Recruitment and Retention Issues Plaguing Law Enforcement

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to research and discover why Correctional and Law Enforcement Agencies state wide have such an issue recruiting staff for positions, as well as struggles faced in retaining certified staff. The group that was chosen for research were those staff that left the agency abruptly and analyze the reason for their leaving. We as agencies are often our own demise when it comes to our staff and we often find ourselves fishing “from the same pond.” The data will reflect what is causing us deficiencies and from this we can formulate better strategies to help in both areas.

Introduction

The issues relating to recruitment and retention of staff is a systemic issue that is faced in law enforcement daily all over the country. While this is an issue in other jobs the severity it poses in law enforcement is detrimental since others' lives are dependent on law enforcement staff. There have been numerous studies and research dealing with these topics that focused on why this is occurring, however there has yet to be a primary cause identified.

People who are interested in law enforcement have several concerns that often deter them from ever stepping out which includes the dangers of the job, having to work long hours, and pay that is often less than desirable. This coupled with negative publicity on television often makes potential employees seek employment elsewhere.

One of the largest hurdles that recruitment faces is the strict criteria to be hired in any law enforcement career. Those seeking employment go elsewhere because this career is not for the faint at heart and people are not willing to make the sacrifices that it takes to be successful which leads to the struggle of recruiting new staff. Potential recruits are subject to an extensive series of screenings that reduces the qualified candidates drastically right from the start. There is also a decrease in potential certified staff that occurs during the academies, due to the training being very intense and the strict requirements and standards that must be met before you ever go to work.

Once the recruits have met all the requirements necessary and go to work the struggle with retention comes to light, which is a problem. Law enforcement agencies are their own worst enemy, because they target staff of other agencies that are certified and ready to go work which results in detrimental results to other like agencies. Small municipalities are not able to keep up with bigger agencies resulting in not being able to maintain staffing. Another issue that plagues retention of staff is being hired is the ones looking for a job and not wanting to make it a career. Agencies must change and devise

a way to make law enforcement more appealing and keep encouraging them to make law enforcement a career.

The issue with both recruitment and retention have been a topic for several years within law enforcement agencies across the country, and it's safe to say that something must be done to correct this downward spiral. The unfortunate part is agencies are limited to what can be done when it comes to financial constraints, and that is where the issues evolve.

The primary focus of this research and the desired results will be to answer the following questions. What methods can be utilized to recruit more qualified candidates? Why are people not staying in law enforcement? What can be done to make this more career motivated, and not just another job?

Literature Review

Recruitment Struggles

Often people venture out into the law enforcement field without first considering the career and understanding what it takes to be an officer. Law enforcement is often thought of as a dream job, you get to drive fast and carry a gun. But the reality is there are a lot of stressful times and long hours one must endure to be successful. Simple fact is that many individuals who believe they want to be police officers soon come to realize that the job isn't for them. In fact, according to multiple surveys from numerous state, most officers who quit do so within the first 5 years of service, and most of those are within the first 2 years. (Roufa, 9/22/18). An obstacle that is often hard to overcome for many departments is that the salaries are not attractive. Everyone that works obviously does so to provide for their families and be successful. It's hard for many smaller departments to be able to offer the money that people today think that they need to survive. Generally speaking, law enforcement salaries "on the face" respectable, especially when you consider that the job often does not require a college education. However, when considering the bad hours, the stress that comes with the job, the loss of days off due to court or other special details, and evenings and holidays and other family time missed, the compensation often doesn't appear to be commensurate with the experience of the job. Many officers simply leave for better paying opportunities, either in private sector or more lucrative federal law enforcement careers. Unfortunately, salary and pay are often largely beyond the control of a police chief or a sheriff. To make up for perceived salary disparities, departments need to get creative and identify other rewards and perks for officer service. (Roufa, 9/22/18). Today's target group does not think of the big picture and the result of being able to go home at the end of a 25-year career and have the benefits that law enforcement officer has. This is one area that could also be emphasized at the entry level in recruitment that could possibly attract the staff that departments are seeking. Anyone that watches television will notice that one of law enforcement's challenges is the negative publicity that officers receive as they are often portrayed as the "bad guy" for doing their jobs. They have often been portrayed as the aggressor rather than the hero just for simply doing their jobs. Law enforcement agencies need to rebuild community trust and law enforcement legitimacy. There is a need as well to uphold the highest

standards of professionalism in an increasingly violent society. (Smith, 2016) Changing of society is a constant recurring issue in recruitment as people have gone from a “live to work” to a “work to live” mentality and the techniques to recruit have gone from one of salary, benefits and time off to “what can you do for me?” (Smith, 2016) It has gotten to the point where departments are having to lower standards to accumulate recruits. For example, prior minor drug charges would allow a person to become eligible for employment in the law enforcement field. Data reveals that young adults up to 23 now have a 41 percent likelihood of having a prior criminal (non-traffic) arrest. (Smith, 2016).

Critics and supporters of law enforcement all agree that there is a need for increased training and a more professional leadership of officers for the future of law enforcement to be successful, but if you cannot get qualified candidates to hire there will be no point. (Smith, 2016).

Departments are going to have to develop new strategies to fill the gap in recruitment but at the same time develop ways to fill the voids that are left by the senior well trained staff that are retiring and that is probably the most difficult obstacle to get over. Knowledge and experience are something that takes time and as time goes on with staff leaving the departments the future of quality professional police departments is unsure. It is believed that a plan that is an immediate, contemporary and relevant recruitment plan, that addresses a critical deficit of entry level officers, and will ultimately focus on strengthening succession is necessary to possibly redirect the direction law enforcement hiring is going. (Smith, 2016)

The profession itself has made drastic changes, in that the stereotypical “beat cop” had knowledge of all the troublemakers in his area and how to deal with them directly. (Smith, 2016) Today when officers find a juvenile breaking the law and take him or her to the parents they immediately attack the officer and everything becomes his fault. It has gotten to the point that this has also become a deterrent to people wanting to become officers. There has been a paradigm shift in the way that people perceive law enforcement until they need them and then they don’t hesitate to call. In the past law enforcement, would often have been a family type career in that often sons would follow in their father’s footsteps and the same with mothers and daughters. However recently this has taken a turn and now there has been a drastic decrease in encouragement for siblings to follow suite. Not only has this lack of peer encouragement been a factor people are not interested in law enforcement for the negative publicity of late. According to figures nationwide, interest in police work has taken a drop, in the city of Nashville, there was a drop-in applicant from 4700 in 2010 to 1900 in 2017. In Seattle, there was a 50% drop and they have a starting salary of \$79000.00. The FBI even suffered with a drop from 21,000 to 13,000 applicants. (LET Staff; 2018) Officers being held criminally liable for incidents have become a contributing factor in recruitment reduction and this obstacle is hard to overcome with all the national attention being shown and attention received in social media. People read and see things of negativity and if they had a little interest this pushes them back the other way. This also effects retention in the departments as well when fellow staff see their subordinates being prosecuted. This results in senior officers wanting out to protect themselves. The business is often a risk versus reward and the risk seems to be too much for the potential applicants. The pay isn’t the main reason many pass policing by, Seattle Deputy Police Chief Marc Garth Green said. “Number one is validation,” he said. “The validation that they’re putting their life on the line. There’s no

respect for that.” He blamed the news media for undermining respect for police authority. (LET Staff; 2018).

Retention Struggles

When it comes to the retention of staff departments are often responsible for their own demise by not spending time on the front end preparing a recruitment program that could answer the questions that often cause staff to leave. Being familiar with everything you could know about a career both good and bad would possibly help with hiring the best qualified staff. This issue needs to be addressed at the entry level when recruitment starts. Departments can reduce attrition from resignations by better educating applicants about the realities of the job. They can also work to identify the characteristics of officers who stay and focus recruiting efforts on individuals with similar traits. (Roufa, 9/22/18).

To better retain qualified staff, one often must take a “think out of the box” approach to show staff appreciation. Most the time officers need very little acknowledgment for their actions so this makes it very easy to do small things to let them know they are appreciated. They do what they do for the love of the job. There are little local police agencies can do to limit the scope of their work and the resulting demand for officers. There are some practices they can adopt to improve recruitment and retention and, hence, their ability to meet the demand for services. First by planning and analysis, as well as surveys and interviews with officers about job satisfaction, can help agencies understand their prospects for attracting and retaining officers. Second, agencies can reduce turnover by offering realistic job previews to the candidates and requiring contracts with new employees. Third, agencies can attract and retain candidates by enhancing compensation and other benefits. Fourth, agencies can increase retention through greater employee engagement, including efforts to increase employee input in decision making and other evaluation and feedback opportunities. By improving organizational effectiveness through better hiring and management practices can improve an agency’s image with its employees and the community. (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, Grammich, 2010).

Many officers end up leaving because they feel that the job they do goes largely unappreciated, or at least under appreciated. Many officers realize their jobs are very important but don’t feel that their superiors understand or recognize the important work they do. Robust and meaningful employee recognition programs can combat some of this. The key word is meaningful. Any employee recognition should have value. Law Enforcement leaders who get from behind the desk from time to time and work alongside their members, too, can demonstrate that the “brass” still knows what it’s like to do the job. (Roufa, 9/22/18).

With it taking almost a year to get a recruit to work with the required training, this still costs the department the experience loss that the veteran officer has. Sgt. Kevin Braman states “It’s one of those jobs where you have to pass a physical test and a written test and then have an ordeal interview, “It’s demanding.” (McKay, et.al. 2017) This is not a law enforcement only issue however when it comes to public safety. Fire departments as well as EMS are facing the same issues as well especially in the smaller municipalities. The issue is believed to be a compounded problem in that there is a mass exit of the Baby Boomer class workers there is also a decrease in the number of people seeking employment in the public safety fields. Ed Medrano, President of the California Police

Chiefs Association stated, "Couple the fact that the economy is booming in a lot of sectors and a lot of people are looking at alternatives to public service." This look at alternative jobs is also attributed to the negative publicity that law enforcement is getting currently throughout the country. People are being painted the wrong image of law enforcement and are afraid that they too will be categorized this way as well if they were to start a career in it. One way however for us to overcome the challenges in recruitment is to target potential officers early and groom them for the career so that they will be ready. (McKay, et.al. 2017)

Social and Generational Complications

The biggest step departments can take in reducing the attrition of their officers is to demonstrate that they recognize the important job they do. Police officers want to know that the sacrifices they make matter, and they need to be shown from time to time the people above them know they matter, too. Finding creative ways to add value to the thanks and appreciation you give your officers can go a long way toward helping them conclude that the frustrations of the job are well worth the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that come with a career in law enforcement. (Roufa, 9/22/18) Departments must find their own ways to reward staff for doing a good job and this should be done so on a regular basis and just recognize the job that they do. It can be as simple as acknowledging them at a shift meeting or a coming up with a weekly flyer that is used to recognize staff and all the good occurrences in the department. We as humans naturally work harder when we know we are being noticed, and more so when you get kudos in front of your peers.

As Baby Boomers begin retiring from law enforcement agencies across the country there is a realization that these voids are not going to be easy to fill. The Walla Walla Police Department is working overtime to recruit and retain staff as the last of the baby boomers get set to leave their agency. (McKay, et.al. 2017) there are officers in that agency that can retire when they reach the age of 53 and this is the choice that they are making. Because of these decisions there is a large void that is being left and with that void there is a lack of experience. The Walla Walla department has 47 officers, 17 of which are at least 50 years of age and close to retirement. Many or all of those of age will call it a career. (McKay, et.al. 2017) Another issue that is being realized by this department is that his average age of the offenders that they deal with is around 20 years old and the officers are working into their 50's and 60's which makes it difficult on several elements.

Departments are facing a different issue and that is one of a generational difference. The baby boomers have gradually moved up and are being replaced by the millennials group that is having to replace them. This leads to a different set of obstacles, as they are driven by a set of values that are causing recruitment staff to develop better and more intense ways to recruit. Each of these generations has a different pattern of behavior, belief system and workplace expectations. Millennials can be described as team oriented, intelligent, cooperative, technology driven and interdependent. Millennials appear to have returned to the traditional family values, and thus, cherish time away from work, they are money conscious and driven financially- one researcher found that 93% believed salary range was critical in choosing law enforcement and almost 92% believed retirement benefits are important. Millennials desire a comfortable, relaxed work

environment in which they have the opportunity for rapid upward mobility. (Langham/5/24/2017) Based on the core desires of the Generation X group law enforcement is the less desirable job as it fails to feed their needs. To be able to attract this group recruiters must develop ads and resort to social media or other technological ideas to reach this group. The confusion sets in at that time as the baby boomers who are left to recruit can't communicate, as they are not familiar with the millennial mindset.

Methods

The focus of this research is to gather information on the issues that are encountered in the law enforcement/corrections field that pertains to recruitment and retention of staff. The method for gathering the information for this research was through surveys submitted to former staff from The Florida Department of Corrections to determine the changes that could be made in our hiring processes which would possibly enhance our ability to keep our agencies appropriately staffed. These surveys were disseminated to various institutions throughout the state via email to former employees. There were no specific identifiers selected in any locations as the issue is systemic on a statewide level. The intent is to gather enough information from these surveys to possibly identify not only what the weaknesses are so that they can be addressed, but also, the strengths so that focus continue to strengthen in those areas as well. The design of the survey is to gather information that would provide information and ideas on what we can do better from staff that obviously had reason to leave their agency and not choose to make a career in the field. The survey is intended to be confidential with only the location identified. The desire of the survey in conclusion is to gather honest answers from those staff so that a solution can be formulated that will hopefully change the direction that is being felt with hiring and retaining quality staff.

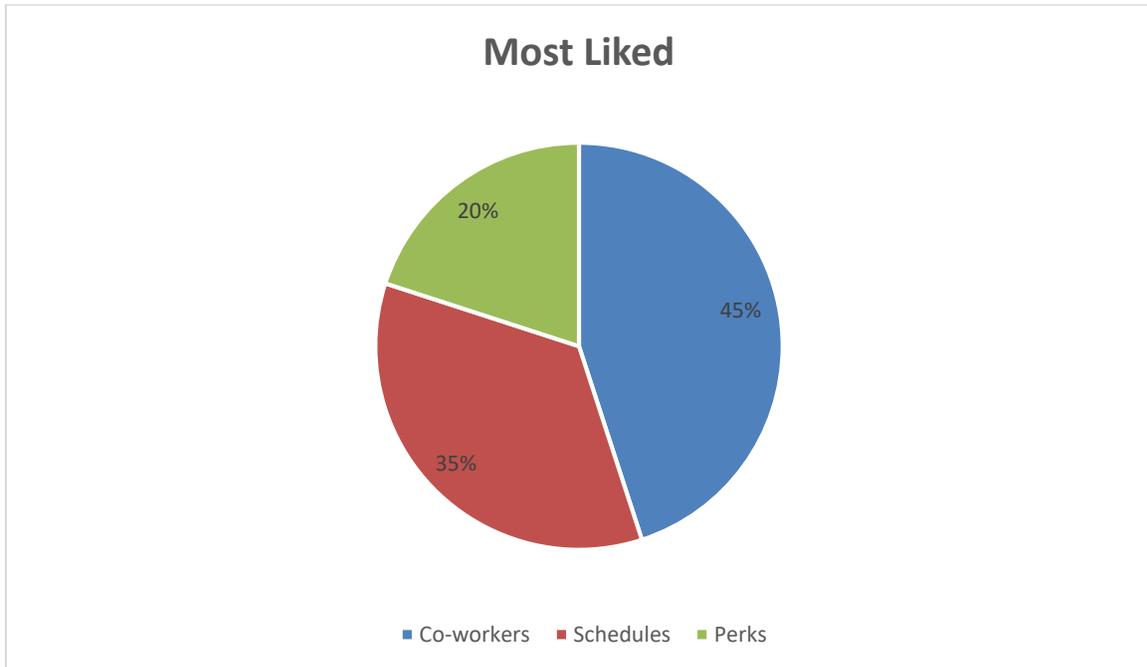
Results

A survey was deployed to 125 employees that had recently resigned from three major institutions within the Florida Department of Corrections. The target group was selected to gather honest data and not that of an employee with negative reason for leaving. At the conclusion of the survey unfortunately there were only 35 participants which is a 43.75% participation average. However, based on these numbers there was enough data to formulate a theory that could be beneficial in the areas of recruitment and retention of staff.

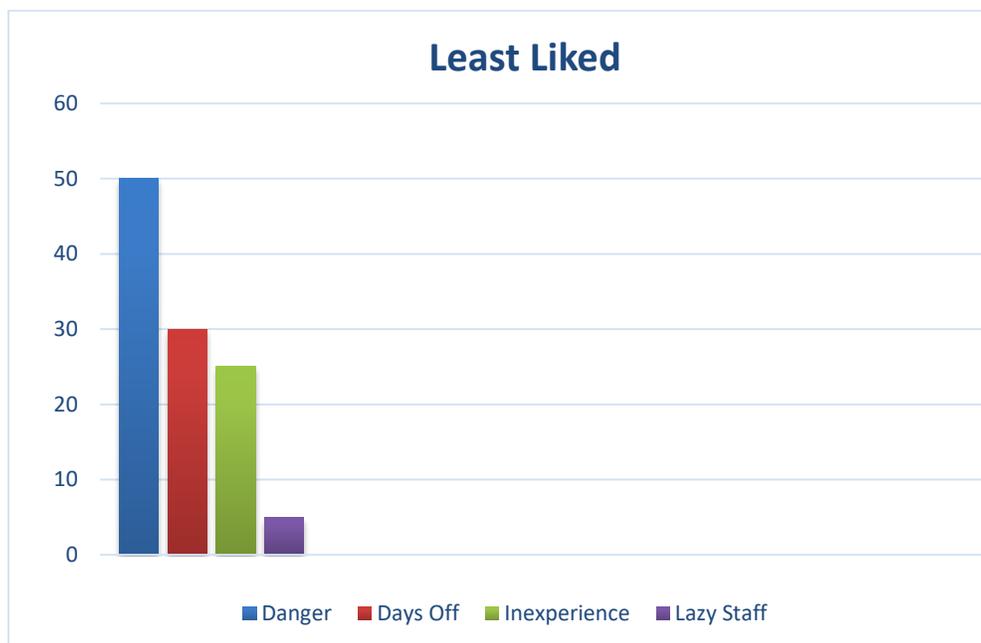
The first question on the survey asked the former employee what contributing factor made you decide to leave the agency and of the ones that responded answered that they found better jobs. This question could have been asked with an explanation since the answer is so broad answer, and could have resulted in why one job is better than the other.

Question #2 inquired about the satisfaction they had with the level of pay and benefits and the results indicated of those responding 100% stated that the pay itself

should have been more. They emphasized that for what that dealt with daily that the pay just wasn't enough.



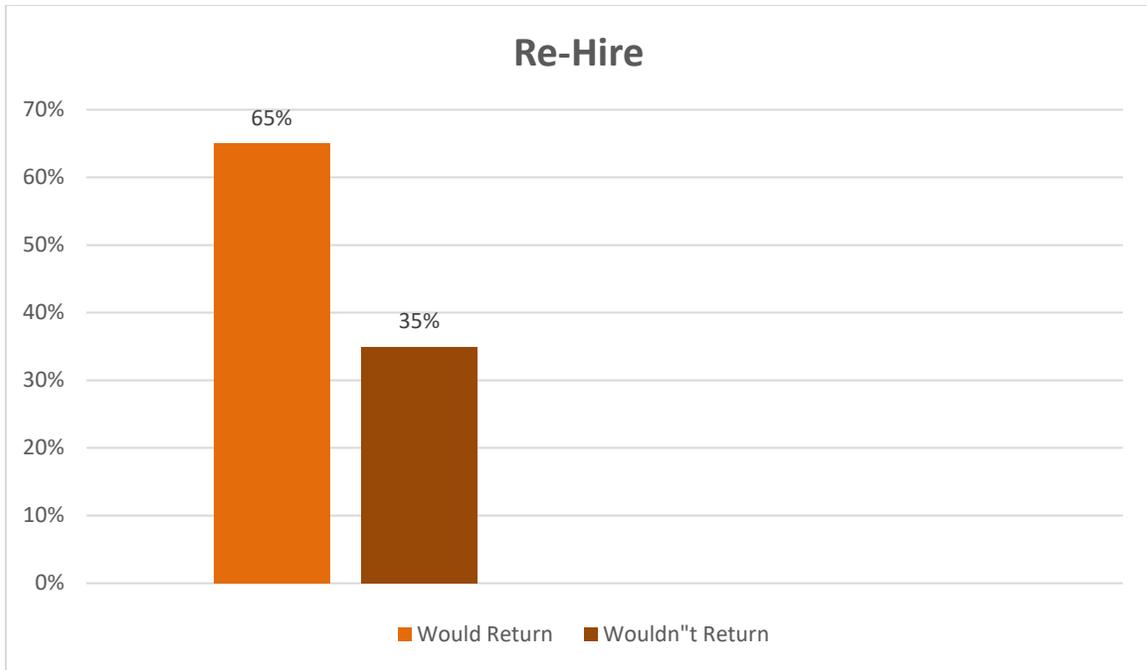
Question #3 inquired into the things that they liked most about the job with 45% of those responding said they enjoyed most of their subordinate staff that they worked with, 35% said that they liked the schedules and the amount of time they were off duty, and the remaining 20% were a mixture of perks related to the job for example the room for advancement opportunities.



In question #4 they were asked as to the least thing that they liked and 50% stated that they felt as if they were in danger while on duty. This is attributed directly to the topic this research paper is about and that is recruitment and retention. Staff are having to work shorthanded and thus gives the feeling that they are in a dangerous situation, which is true to some extent. The remaining surveyed had various other reasons to include 30% having to work days off to ensure shift coverage, 25% staff inexperience, and 5% staff just being lazy.



Questions 5 & 6 went hand in hand. They were asked did they feel that the training they received was adequate and where they provided the tools necessary to get the job done. Combined 65% stated they felt they received the training and tools necessary to get by in the job, but it could be better. This agency puts all new employees through 120 hour on-boarding program and then they are sent to their prospective shifts. The consensus from this question is staff felt that they should be trained a bit longer before being turned over to work due to the amount of information necessary to get the job done safely. Of the other answers received 25% were not satisfied with the training and tools they received while the remaining 10% stated everything they needed was provided.



On Question 7, they were asked if they would ever re-seek employment with the agency. Surprisingly the results of those answers received were 65% stated they would if the pay was better while the remaining 35% stated they had no desire to work in the agency again.

Lastly, Question #8 asked what we could do better as an agency to make things better. Of those that responding the majority stated that the pay would make a huge difference in making things better. Other answers indicated that training that focused on interpersonal skills would be a huge asset in making things better.

It was safe to say that based on the totality of the survey that the pay was the leading reason that could help agencies with their struggles of recruiting new staff as well as retaining the senior staff. Also, gathered from the survey is evidence that there needs to be some form of interpersonal skills and diversity training brought back into the curriculum, because there is a gap in generation groups that appears to be an obstacle. One surprising fact brought out was the need for inmate programming to keep the inmates occupied which would put relief on the staff supervising them.

The survey didn't receive the participation desired, but through it all it is apparent that the research and the survey continue to point in the same direction when it comes to recruitment and retention issues in law enforcement agencies, and it is evident while some things are out of the agencies control there are things that could be done internally to change.

Discussion

As the results of the survey indicate, many of the staff leaving left for the reasons of securing better jobs. At the end of the day everyone works their chosen field to provide for their families. There was a time when correctional-law enforcement based were competitive in salary but fallen behind in todays' workforce. People are not working now to secure pensions as much, and more often just working for the pay today instead of a career, and unfortunately careers in law enforcement cannot compete. So, it's safe to say that primarily money is leading the way in causing public safety recruitment and retention to suffer. However, this reason is unfortunately one driving faction that agencies cannot control. Safety concerns were another issue that had an adverse effect on potential employees. It is obvious that both corrections and law enforcement are getting more dangerous by the day and perpetrators are getting less and less respect for the badge to the point that they are engaging officers more now than ever. Not a day goes by that we do not hear something on the news about a negative event that takes place between law enforcement of some fashion and the bad guys. This is another factor that is driven somewhat by sources outside of our control. However, there are things that can be done internally to prepare staff better to handle situations and to be more assertive in situations.

As you look at the data, another contributor of staff leaving is due to feeling unappreciated by senior staff. This is the area that should be looked at in depth as it can easily be corrected. Emphasis should be put on employees that are new to the field to pass knowledge down to ensure that staff have the tools necessary to be successful. In order to do this senior staff should invest in new staff coming into the field and help them develop. The mind set of holding back information and not including the rookies often drive them away and contributes a great deal to their leaving. Our agencies are struggling because of there being so many different generational gaps and all want to try and turn the other, rather than working together to get the job done. The entire process must be a give and take. Baby-boomers seem unwilling to adapt to new generations and a realization must be made as boomers are quickly fading and new generations are here. This is more the reason to take time with new staff and teach them as they are the futures of the agencies that have had a lot of blood, sweat, and tears poured into making them successful.

Recommendations

As you can gather from the research data and the survey it is evident that the leading factor for recruitment and retention issues is by far at the end of the day due to the lack of salary dollars. People working in the public safety sector often do so because they love to help people, but often that is not enough to retain them. This driving force prevents possible good people from applying and the reason they leave. The unfortunate problem with this issue is that agencies have very little control over pay, as salaries are dictated by either states or county government, and it's a hard sale to persuade entities to invest in this area.

When it comes to both recruitment and retention, agencies must formulate ideas that make the job more appealing by the ways we present the job. This could begin with

focusing on the benefits and insurance that is offered and the big picture. For example, a starting Correctional Officer begins at \$33,500 after certification but they are making approximately \$52,000 when you look at the benefits packages. Also, agencies could offer sign on bonuses of minimal amounts that entice people to look closer at the field.

The research also uncovers that the newer generations come on board eager to go to work, but often leave because they feel unappreciated by senior staff. This is a driving factor as well that agencies do have some control over. One of the key areas that could be revisited could be the training of new staff. There are often barriers between senior staff and new staff that is simply the lack of being able to understand each other's direction. For example, the millennial and generation X&Y learn from asking a lot of questions these groups are extremely intelligent, but it takes patience to get to where they need to be on the job. Take that attribute and combine with a baby boomer who just knows how to work and expects everyone to be the same way and there is where the division begins, leading to the younger staff feeling unappreciated. This could be easily resolved if agencies developed training curriculum that focused on generational differences and adapt a concept that would merge everyone's way of thinking.

In conclusion from information gathered during this project it is safe to say that something must be done as agencies continue to suffer with no change of direction. The survey and research do bring out that the most driving factor is one that cannot be done internally, but also that there are obstacles that can be conquered within the agency that could help a great deal. At the end of the day recruitment and retention is truly a systemic problem throughout the entire country in public service agencies and unfortunately, there is no "magic answer", it takes thinking outside the box and the willingness to change to curve the problem.

Warden Heath Holland has work for the Florida Department of Corrections for 22 years. He began his career in Corrections in 1996 as a Correctional Officer advancing in 2003 when he transitioned to a Classification Officer. In 2009, he was promoted to Classification Supervisor and in 2013 made another promotion to Assistant Warden at Jackson CI. He has been assigned as Warden at Jefferson CI in Monticello Florida and currently is assigned as Warden at Calhoun CI in Blountstown, Florida. Heath has a Bachelor's of Science in Criminal Justice from Troy State University.

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Appendix A

Survey

1. What was the contributing factor that made you leave the Agency?
A) Didn't like the Job
B) Found other Employment
C) Didn't feel support
D) Other (Fill in Below) _____
2. Were you satisfied with the level of pay and benefits you were receiving?
Yes or No
3. What did you like the most about the job? _____
4. What did you like least about the job? _____
5. Did you feel that you were given the appropriate training to do the job?
Yes or No
6. Did you feel that you were provided the adequate tools to perform your job duties?
Yes or No
7. Would you reconsider re-employment with the Agency?
Yes or No
8. What could the agency do to make things better? _____