



California Police Chiefs Association

Formal comments to Little Hoover Commission regarding police training

February 23, 2021

The California Police Chiefs Association (CPCA) represents the 332 active municipal police chiefs, their seconds-in-command, and retired police chiefs throughout California. The primary function of CPCA is to provide resources and opportunities for professional development and advocacy on behalf of the association's members. In this regard, CPCA produces dozens of training programs and workshops geared towards addressing critical issues facing law enforcement and developing leadership skills within the profession.

To help provide direction, CPCA is led by a Board of Directors comprised of regional representatives and an Executive Committee who provide feedback and direction on the various topics related to law enforcement and public safety. CPCA also has an active Training Committee that facilitates the production of annual training courses. In response to the questions posed by the Little Hoover Commission regarding police training, CPCA solicited responses from our Board of Directors, who in turn shared their views from themselves and police chiefs in their region. Below is a compilation of their responses to the specific questions posed by the Little Hoover Commission:

1. Questions: How does existing training content align, or does not align, with officers' experience in the field?

To a large extent, the responses we received confirm that training aligns with the realities of the job largely due to the ability of agencies to tailor their own ongoing training curriculum to meet their needs. This flexibility allows agencies to utilize the approved POST curriculum to focus on emerging issues. However, the more rigid requirements set in statutory mandates can lag behind contemporary needs. For example, several chiefs voiced a desire to have more time allotted to problem solving, communications, and community policing philosophy to help clearly define the overall mission of the department.

The biggest issue raised regarding whether current training matches the realities of policing revolve around inadequate funding and limited

"The seemingly continuous addition of 'mandated training requirements' is starting to become challenging. Given law enforcement staffing ratios in California, coupled with the increasing complexity and reporting requirements for so many calls, it seems to get harder and harder to find time to meet all training requirements."

-CPCA Board Member

time, both which directly impact the quality and amount of training. There is a consistent desire among chiefs to include more real-life scenario-based training and more ongoing and regular periodic training to achieve muscle memory and retention of complex skills.

2. Question: Are there any additional training subjects that are not adequately covered by existing curriculum but could help officers better prepare for realities of the job?

There is almost universal agreement among respondents that there is a need for additional training in several areas, including officer wellness and resiliency, critical thinking, communications, and professionalism.

“The job carries stress which impacts us and our families in varying degrees. Officers who are better prepared to handle the job stress carry a greater likelihood of professional and personal success.”

-CPCA Board Member

Officer wellness and resiliency has been an emerging area of focus for law enforcement over the last decade. Acute stress, PTSD, depression and other mental health ailments are insidious consequences of the trauma officers experience on the job. CPCA has created a standing committee on officer wellness to assist in developing new programs geared towards impacting these issues, which has highlighted the

dire need for more education and resources. Preparing officers for the mental health impacts of day-to-day trauma helps them cope and survive the inevitable tragic events they will experience. Chiefs have found success here thinking outside the box with classes on yoga, meditation, mindfulness and training on other resiliency skills. However, as mentioned above, cost and time are limiting factors in delivering substantial resources for these programs.

Other training areas identified as lacking center around preparing officers for the modern demands placed on officers in the greater societal context. Homelessness and mental health issues are unextractable from law enforcement duties at this point, and officers need new skills in order to respond to these calls for service. This includes more interpersonal communications, crisis intervention, professionalism and de-escalation training. Lastly, with so many massive changes to our criminal justice system happening every year, an annual course on case law and legislative updates has been found necessary by several chiefs.

3. Question: Is existing training effective in achieving desired outcomes/behavior changes in the field, how can it be improved?

Overall, current training is seen as demonstrably effective in achieving changes of behavior, decisions, and reaction times related to each specific topic. This is measured by the reduction in contacts, use-of-force incidents, resolutions, public opinion and other statistics kept by individual agencies. Although training does appear to offer measured positive impacts, chiefs acknowledge that does not mean the training is perfect or without need for improvement. Variables in training – both in quality of instructor and mode of education – are seen as

contributing factors in terms of retention and impact, and both are seen as needing improvement.

As in many cases regarding all types of training, the quality of the education is often directly related to the quality of the educator. Equally important is the mode in which the lesson is presented. Decades of research demonstrate

“We want solid, experienced instructors but they also need to be currently active and immersed in police work while acting as instructors. Telling “war stories” of days gone by is not effective and in some instances can be damaging to forming officers’ opinions and attitudes towards the job. Academy instructors should be our best and brightest.”

-CPCA Board Member

block sessions or all-day training as a method for teaching a subject, especially if those lessons are not reinforced or revisited for months or years, is incredibly ineffective. Instead, studies show spacing out lessons over time, including opportunities for practical application and review, are much more effective in terms of retention and understanding. Many comments from respondents highlight this as a critical issue in law enforcement training. As one chief surmised, “one and done just doesn’t work.”

4. Question: Do officers have sufficient access or opportunity to take higher level courses appropriate to rank and experience? What are challenges and opportunities?

Most agencies feel they provide adequate opportunities for advanced education, with cost being the most significant limiting factor. Agencies utilize various incentives and partnerships with community colleges and UC/CSU to offer college exposure. Online learning can help provide additional opportunities at low cost, but should supplement, not supplant, training that requires hands-on experience.

This year, CPCA is sponsoring legislation (Senate Bill 387, by Senator Anthony Portantino) to include specific college courses into the Basic Certificate requirement. SB 387 also provides financial grants to help underserved and economically disadvantaged individuals pursue a career in law enforcement. The goal of this legislation is to ultimately utilize our UC/CSU and community college system to create a public safety-specific educational pathway that will address many of the issues raised above. Most importantly, this new pathway will augment existing criminal justice programs that are not necessarily specific to police work and will instead include a greater focus on communication, critical thinking, sociology, psychology, and other coursework that will benefit the modern officer.

Ultimately, it is our goal to advance the education requirements for California law enforcement in a manner that is focused on preparing recruits for the job, while at the same time ensuring we are actively recruiting and incentivizing individuals from all backgrounds into choosing this profession.

5. Question: Is there a need for a greater standardization in the way training is offered?

Standardization is important, but so is flexibility. Most chiefs feel POST does a good job of standardizing the basic coursework, but also feel it is important that we allow each region to develop specific training components.

“There are universal topics which should be prioritized. However, each region should have an influence on culture and priorities of the regional training centers. Just as not every community or police agency has the same expectations in policing and priorities, not every academy should be managed in the same way. A great deal of training is already standardized, but not every agency or geographical location is the same. Some regions experience different trends than other regions in the state. In some instances, training needs to be customized, or tailored to meet the needs of an individual agency or region.”

-CPCA Board Member

6. Question: If you could build a training and educational program for CA law enforcement from the ground up, what elements would you redesign?

Responses to this question are based on a scenario with unlimited resources and staffing, and although unlikely achieved under real-life circumstances, are still indicative of the changes sought by police chiefs.

- More emphasis on communications, principled policing, procedural justice, de-escalation, crisis intervention and culture.
- Create a structure less militaristic and more conducive for higher learning.
- Allowance for more internship programs and exposure to on-the-job training for cadets with social workers, mental health professionals, DA’s office, public defender’s office, corrections, community service, etc., so there is more of a wholistic understanding of the community and the criminal justice system.
- Officer wellness and resiliency taught from the beginning, with ongoing training throughout an officer’s career.
- In and out phases of the academy that move from the street to the classroom.
- Increase emotional intelligence and leadership training, less block training, more periodic training.

7. Conclusion

There is a vast amount of work that needs to be done to remodel police training. CPCA and our members stand ready as a partner in the efforts ahead.