

U.S. Department of Justice  
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# FBI Law Enforcement

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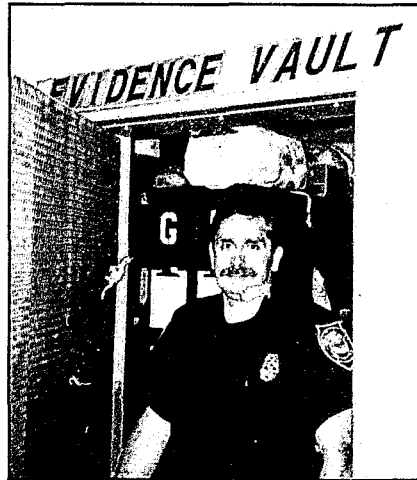
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# Civilian Services

By  
BRUCE D. WILKERSON



**P**olice departments nationwide confront increasing demands for police service without enough officers to respond adequately. At the same time, law enforcement administrators face the major dilemma of trying to put more officers on the street without sufficient funding to pay for them. One remedy for this dilemma is greater

use of civilian employees. Civilianization enables more sworn police officers to answer service calls requiring full police powers, while still providing timely service for other types of calls.

Traditionally, law enforcement agencies have restricted civilian employees to clerical duties. Yet, in many departments, even this limited

role has faced some resistance. However, one State, Kentucky, adopted new legislation that allows departments to go one step further and employ civilians with limited enforcement powers.

Expanding the role of civilians presents some distinct advantages to law enforcement agencies, but it can also encounter strong opposition from within the ranks of sworn police officers. For departments considering civilianization, some hurdles must be overcome, but the benefits to the department and the community can be worthwhile.

## The Road to Civilianization

Departments can start the journey to civilianization by identifying positions that civilian employees can fill. The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals recommends against selecting positions that require peace officer status, arrest powers, and expertise normally acquired only through field experience or that contribute to the professional development of sworn officers.<sup>1</sup>

In most departments, the first job classifications to undergo civilianization are those of records clerk and dispatcher, but even those are subject to debate. Opponents claim that the public expects to see an officer when visiting the local police department, not a civilian employee who must consult with or call an officer from the street. Questions also arise about the safety of a civilian employee alone at the station during late hours.<sup>2</sup>

Neither issue poses insurmountable problems. Granted, initial contacts between the public and



*Captain Wilkerson serves with the Bowling Green, Kentucky, Police Department.*

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police administrator.  
”**

the police department are very important. However, proper screening during the hiring phase can help departments to select individuals well-suited for dealing with the public. Also, sufficient training can prepare civilian employees to handle the most common situations. Of course, if an unusual situation develops, an officer or supervisor is just a radio call away.

Educating the community about the benefits of hiring civilians with limited enforcement powers can build support for the program. Chamber of commerce and city council members, as well as the general public, usually embrace initiatives that provide better police coverage at a lower cost to taxpayers.

Furnishing dispatchers with a safe facility simply requires minor renovations. Barriers that do not offend the public but still furnish needed safety can be copied from various commercial enterprises. These solutions, however, assume that the biggest hurdle—getting department members to accept the

concept of civilianization—can be overcome.

#### **Officer Acceptance**

The most critical step in implementing a successful civilian program is to build acceptance among officers. Changing attitudes and persuading officers to embrace the concept provide the greatest challenges for the police administrator.

A very strong bond exists among officers that civilians, even department employees, do not share. Also, some old-line officers claim that most positions, especially dispatchers, require “on-the-road” experience.<sup>3</sup> Such issues usually divide sworn personnel across all ranks and ages.<sup>4</sup>

Many officers, however, do recognize the value and contribution of civilian employees. One study found that both sworn and civilian employees agreed on the importance of their respective positions and shared similar employee values. Civilians, however, placed less emphasis on loyalty to fellow

employees.<sup>5</sup> Veteran officers feel threatened by those who are not part of the cadre of sworn officers to whom they entrust their lives. It is management’s task to overcome such resistance and to integrate civilians and officers into a cohesive team.

#### **Making the Transition**

All levels of management collectively must support civilianization in order to sell it to the rest of the department. Preparation and planning can make it easier to place civilian employees in positions previously held by officers. Some techniques that may smooth the transition include clearly defining roles and relationships, implementing a familiarization program, planning periodic meetings between managers of civilian and sworn officers, and integrating sworn officers with civilians.<sup>6</sup>

In the beginning, the role of civilian employees and the appropriate relationship to sworn officers should be explained to everyone. For example, civilian dispatchers must understand that they do not supervise the officers with whom they work. Officers must also understand that dispatchers have control or authority over the information needed to do the job properly. From the outset, managers need to inform civilians that their positions support the officers in the field and that they were hired for their contributions to the overall goals of the agency.<sup>7</sup>

A familiarization program for both officers and civilians can help to clarify the different functions. Perhaps a limited tour of duty in

the civilian positions for sworn officers and a ride-along program with sworn officers for civilian employees would help each group to understand and appreciate their co-workers' situations.<sup>8</sup>

Another technique is for supervisors and other midlevel managers of civilian and sworn officers to meet periodically. The meetings provide a forum to exchange work-related information and goals. They may also help civilians and officers to develop closer, personal bonds.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, for those special positions that require some knowledge of the street, sworn officers and civilians can be integrated. This not only provides easy and immediate access to specialized knowledge for civilian employees but it also increases contact between the two types of employees within the department.<sup>10</sup>

### **New Roles for Civilians in Kentucky**

Beyond the traditional records and dispatch roles, civilians also can fill positions with limited police powers. Some agencies restrict such powers to parking enforcement officers or school crossing guards. In 1992, however, Kentucky passed legislation enabling municipalities to create two new positions—citation officer and public safety officer.

Citation officers issue citations for violations of motor vehicle statutes (except moving violations), issue citations for violations of local ordinances that do not constitute violations of the Kentucky Penal Code, and authorize the removal of illegally parked vehicles. Public

safety officers go one step further and issue citations for misdemeanors or criminal offenses committed in their presence.

These two new employee classifications make it possible for fully sworn officers to concentrate on more important tasks. Choosing whether to use citation or public safety officers depends on the goals of the agency.

### **Hiring and Training Civilian Officers**

Prudent personnel selection and effective training are integral elements to ensure a successful program of this type. Agencies must be very careful to select individuals who are capable of providing the best service but who recognize the limitations of the positions. Some agencies see the potential for using these positions as a stepping stone to sworn officer status. However, a

real danger can exist when these positions are used in that way. Police administrators should be cautious because civilians who want to become sworn officers may overstep their bounds in an effort to prove themselves. A high level of frustration with the current situation may develop, resulting in low morale among the ranks of civilian officers.

Hiring retired personnel, sworn or civilian, may be a better choice to fill the civilian officer positions. Retired police officers have the advantage of knowing the job and having the respect of the current staff. Civilian retirees bring the advantage of an outside perspective. The hiring of either type of retiree avoids the gung-ho attitude found in many young employees, which may cause them to go beyond their authority.

The Kentucky Department of Criminal Justice Training provides

*Citation officers issue citations for non-moving violations of motor vehicle statutes and authorize the removal of illegally parked vehicles.*



instruction for Kentucky's law enforcement personnel, including citation and public safety officers. These officers attend a 3-week training course that covers such topics as accident investigation, vehicle operations, legal considerations, traffic-related offenses, and first-aid/CPR.

State law mandates this training prior to an individual's being appointed as a citation or public safety officer. All newly hired officers receive an additional week of classroom training from their respective departments. This instruction includes basic radio procedure, department forms and procedures, and community relations. The classroom courses are followed by 2 to 4 weeks of field training. All new municipal police department employees in Kentucky are placed on probation for 1 year.

### Legal Issues

The employment of civilian officers raises legal issues similar to those encountered when employing sworn officers. Liability is assumed by the department and the city when questions arise regarding adequate training, proper supervision, or performance of duties in accordance with the law and department policy. Any employee can be sued, but the city government provides an insurance policy and defends all city employees acting in the performance of their duties.

### Exploring New Options

Shortly after the Kentucky Legislature modified the State's penal code, the Bowling Green, Kentucky, Police Department

began to explore the potential benefits of increased civilianization. A review of the department's annual reports from 1989 to 1992 showed that adopting the new employee classifications could save thousands of work hours for sworn police officers and thousands of dollars for the department.

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**Beyond the traditional records and dispatch roles, civilians also can fill positions with limited police powers.**

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Data from the annual reports showed that it took the equivalent of six full-time officers to investigate accidents and issue nonmoving citations. Assuming that officers additionally spent about one-third of their time performing administrative and patrol duties, the number of hours spent on these tasks increased to the equivalent of eight full-time officers.

Eight sworn police officers at a beginning salary of \$19,730 cost \$157,840 per year. In contrast, 8 citation or public safety officers at a beginning salary of \$14,810<sup>11</sup> only cost \$118,480 per year. These civilian officers are not entitled to police incentive pay, which provides \$2,500 to each sworn officer, or to the enhanced pension benefits received by sworn officers.

Therefore, the department found that by hiring eight citation or public safety officers, it could save at least \$40,000 annually (about 25 percent) and increase the number of sworn officers available to respond to calls requiring full police service.

### Conclusion

Municipalities in Kentucky have a unique opportunity to capitalize on the new legislation that permits the hiring of civilians with limited police powers. Implementing such a program requires a progressive educational program within both the department and the community. While significant monetary savings can be realized from such a program, the greatest advantage comes from putting more sworn officers on the street to serve the community. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, "Assignment of Civilian Police Personnel," *Police* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1973), 258-262.

<sup>2</sup> James Korczynski, "Civilians in the Police Function," *Law and Order*, April 1978, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Growth of Civilian Staff Heralds Dramatic Change in the Police Service," *Police*, March 1990, 28-30.

<sup>5</sup> S.K. Shernock, "Differential Significance of Sworn Status and Organizational Position in the Civilianization of the Police Communications Division," *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 1988, 288-302.

<sup>6</sup> James J. Hennessy, "The Use of Civilians in Police Work," *Police Chief*, April 1976, 36-39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> The entry-level salary for citation and public safety officer positions was selected based on the salary of parking enforcement positions, which are filled by civilian employees.