

Many Agencies, One Voice

If a speaker stands in front of a crowd, and many people shout their individual questions, no individual concern stands out. If, however, the audience members confer and realize that many of them want to ask the same question and appoint one person to ask it, the chances of the speaker hearing and answering it increase astronomically.

The 2010 National Summit for Small Law Enforcement Agencies took place in Ft. Myers, Fla., on Aug. 3-5, 2010, targeting small and rural law enforcement agencies with less than 50 sworn officers. Thirty-nine chiefs and sheriffs representing 27 states shared their ideas regarding the top issues facing small agencies.

The event was hosted by the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) System's Small, Rural, Tribal and Border (SRTB) Regional Center. NLECTC is a program of the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ). NIJ and SRTB selected the participants, who attended at no cost, based primarily on their recognized roles as leaders in the small and rural law enforcement community.

Participants identified their primary concern as the lack of a unified voice at the national level to present the concerns of small and rural agencies. Attendees agreed that this concern needed to be addressed in order to attain their other top goals (see sidebar, "Top Concerns From 2010 National Summit for Small Law Enforcement Agencies") and developed a working plan to meet this goal.

"What we consistently heard is, 'we just want one voice,' " says Scott Barker, director of the SRTB Regional Center. "Quite often, when the national organizations form committees and working groups, they typically select representatives from major cities. It isn't that they have a hidden agenda, they just don't realize that policing is different in rural areas. They've been asked in the past to have small agency tracks at conferences, and they're willing, but they don't know what to include. We've prepared a list of suggested topics that will help them with that."

Barker says it is hard for any one small agency to have much of an impact on policy, but because there

are so many of them (the majority of the nation's law enforcement agencies have less than 50 sworn officers) they can make a big impact by speaking together. "They just want their unique concerns to be heard."

To be sure those concerns reach the right ears, NIJ and SRTB invited representatives from the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Sheriffs' Association, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center's rural training institute and other major players to attend the event. This allowed all the stakeholders to come together to learn about each others' wants and needs.

Barker says the summit started out with a purpose of examining the specific needs of law enforcement, but as the group met to discuss needs, the participants realized that input into the big picture from small and rural

TOP CONCERNS FROM 2010 NATIONAL SUMMIT FOR SMALL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

At the three-day summit, participants formed working groups that identified the top five issues facing small and rural agencies, as follows:

- **Representation.** Small agencies need representation in larger national organizations like the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Sheriffs' Association. Although the majority of agencies are considered small (50 or less sworn officers), neither organization recognizes them with a formal branch.
- **Funding.** Our perception is that the vast majority of funding goes to agencies with more than 50 officers.
- **Training.** Ancillary costs associated with sending officers to training causes problems. Departments often cannot afford overtime to backfill staff positions while other officers train. Also, nontraditional, computer-based, online training needs to be

agencies outweighed all other goals. Participants agreed to start out by trying to work within the existing national organization framework, with a backup plan of starting their own association specific to small and rural agencies. As part of the main plan, participants agreed to work through their state agencies to promote the “one voice” goal for small, rural, tribal and border agencies.

Kim Wallace, chief of a six-officer force in Dover, Tenn., says her state association has made plans to start a Rural Law Enforcement Committee, on which she will serve.

“I was very pleased with the way the summit progressed,” Wallace says. “It seemed like we were all on the same page in feeling that small law enforcement agencies are underrepresented.”

She adds, “I think that training is definitely an issue and it should be a priority for all agencies. A lot of smaller departments focus on in-house training due to budget restraints and it’s just not the same quality of training. I believe there is a need for more funding in training specifically for smaller agencies, and this will allow smaller departments to seek out affordable opportunities for training that will benefit them.”

Chief Jeff Sale of the 14-officer Cheney (Wash.) Police Department, who played a key role in organizing the summit from the participant perspective, agrees that the event went well and feels that compared to the first summit held in 2009, participants came away with a better action plan.

“Obviously, the number one issue is the sense that we, as small and rural agencies, don’t play a part in national policy issues,” Sale says. “Our needs differ from those of major metropolitan areas and we want a say in how law enforcement works in this country. The kind of feedback that I’m getting from around the country is this has been a long time coming. The perception has always been there, but the need to be heard has never been brought to the forefront and no one has said ‘Let’s do something about it.’ Now, we’re going to do something.”

From Newberry County, S.C., Sheriff Lee Foster also notes that many participants immediately returned to their respective local organizations to promote summit goals, a much-needed step.

“The number one item that came out of the meeting was the lack of representation,” says Foster, who leads a department of 47 sworn officers. “Ninety percent of

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Top Concerns From 2010 National Summit For Small Law Enforcement Agencies (continued)

explored. Lastly, a standardization of basic training needs to be adopted and accepted by all states.

- **Communications.** Federal “unfunded” mandates place undue hardships on small agencies. Also, a need exists to take control of standards for communications and not to allow product manufacturers to dictate what public safety needs.
- **Technology.** Law enforcement needs user-driven technology standards. Also, life-cycle management is a must to prevent vendors from obsolescing technology to force new equipment purchases.

All participants agreed to work within their respective state associations to make these issues known.

law enforcement is rural, yet in front of Congress, a rural sheriff would not pull the same weight as a chief from a major city like Los Angeles or New York, or even a smaller one like Columbia (S.C.). We just don’t have the pull that the larger agencies have.”

“The national organizations don’t have any special programs for small agencies, but they do for larger ones,” he adds. “Rural areas are sparsely populated and spread out. In somewhere like Alaska, Montana or the Dakotas, a sheriff may have to cover thousands of square miles with just a few deputies. That’s a completely different picture and different needs than those of larger agencies. We need to make that known at the national level.”

For the latest information on progress made toward realizing the summit’s action plan, visit <http://srtbrc.org/summit-2> or contact Scott Barker at sbarker@srtbrc.org.



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