

Early Intervention Systems For Law Enforcement

Steve Rothlein, Deputy Director (Retired)
Miami-Dade Police Department

Law enforcement administrators throughout the country have long recognized that a small percentage of officers are responsible for a disproportionate share of complaints, which can tarnish the reputation of the entire agency. Since the early 1980's, many large police agencies began to establish tracking systems that systematically identify patterns of behavior of individual officers. This is a problem solving approach which goes beyond taking action on a particular incident which is a concern, but identifying trends and patterns of behavior which require a more strategic response.

The premise of an Early Intervention System is essentially to identify an officer who is likely to engage in potentially damaging behavior **before** the behavior occurs. An Early Intervention System that only systematically tracks complaints and other behaviors for documentation after they have happened without analysis and action to prevent further improper conduct is not effective.

The key to successful implementation of an Early Intervention System in a law enforcement agency is credibility. The system must function in a manner which is perceived as fair and effective by all of the involved stakeholders; This is an achievable objective which can become a significant tool a police chief can utilize in managing the culture of their agency. The following is a brief outline of the essential elements required to establish an effective system:

The *purpose* of establishing an Early Intervention System:

- Identify officers suffering from stress prior to a major incident
- Protect the officer and the department from inappropriate behavior as a result of undue stress
- Systematically identify trends relating to training needs, misconduct, or policy concerns that could lead to departmental liability.

The *foundation* for an effective system includes the following components:

- Accumulation of significant data. (garbage in, garbage out.)
- Involvement of the First Line Supervisors
- Appropriate follow-up

The following are examples of *risk indicators*, which can be built into the system:

- Complaints
- Use of force incidents
- Sick time

- Shooting incidents
- Resisting arrest cases
- Battery on a police officer cases
- Arrested subject injuries
- Officer Injury reports
- Pursuits
- Vehicle accidents
- Civil Litigation
- Head Strikes

The following are examples of *action alternatives*, which can be initiated if an officer is identified:

- No-action (the officers behavior has been deemed appropriate)
- Psychological counseling
- Supervisory counseling
- Periods of supervised observation in the field
- Peer counseling
- Drug testing if reasonable suspicion exists
- Alcohol rehabilitation
- Reassignment
- Remedial Training
- Stress Reduction Training

Benefits of an Early Intervention System:

- Can salvage an officers career
- Defend the agency in a “custom and practice” lawsuit
- Force supervisory involvement in officer development
- Control complaints and use of force and restore public confidence
- Supports termination
- Provides information to develop training, policy and tactics

Pitfalls to avoid when establishing a system:

- Failure to utilize the system in a positive manner as opposed to strictly punitive.
- Inappropriate follow-up for officer identified that have acted appropriately
- Failing to gain overall support of the purpose of the system
- Failure to use the system for **Early** intervention as opposed to after the fact data.

Informal Indicators:

- Large sums of money
- Personality changes
- Lifestyle changes
- Circle of Associates
- Rumors

State of the art system:

- Focus on groups, not just individuals
- Focus on supervisors as well as officers
- Corruption analysis unit to interpret data

Summary

The establishment of an Early Intervention System in a law enforcement agency in today's policing environment provides several advantages to a police administrator. A primary benefit is that the entire agency is put on notice that too many complaints and other negative indicators are being reviewed by the administration. Another benefit is the ability to identify patterns and trends, which begin to emerge when the collected data is blended and analyzed in a comprehensive manner.

The Miami-Dade Police Department has one of the earliest systems of this type in the United States, and demonstrates the effectiveness of an Early Intervention System. Their system clearly indicates that since 1981, the first full year this system was established in the department, the number of officers identified for excessive complaints and use of force was substantially diminished. Other major departments, which have implemented this type of system, have expressed similar results.

Each year new software systems have developed which increase the effectiveness of data analysis for this purpose. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing law enforcement administrators today is to develop systems that track not only individual behavior, but group behavior as well. Many famous police scandals including the Miami River Cops, LA Majors, Rampart, and the Buddy Boys in New York all involved groups of officers whom engaged in criminal behavior. Looking at these cases in hindsight, several characteristics emerge which may have been helpful in discovering the potential for misconduct prior to the front-page scandals erupting. Common threads include theft complaints, brutality, and the same shift and same supervisor of the involved individuals. Law enforcement agencies tend to track individual behavior, however, it is evident that tracking group behavior is equally critical and should be included in a state of the art system.

