

OPEN LETTER ON INTEGRITY OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

I am reminded of some sage advice from former Sheriff Aubrey Rogers, my predecessor, on the occasion of his retirement from office and my assumption of duties as Sheriff. He rightfully reminded me of the lament of the Chief Executive Officer (in the Sheriff's context) – "no one will ever care about the Sheriff's Office as much as you do as Sheriff."

As a Sheriff of tenure, I can say with authority that our Agency has set high expectations and incorporated checks and balances in place to ensure compliance. Unfortunately, even with these elevated standards we are periodically disappointed by our fellow members. Publishing our findings of wrongdoing for public discourse is a punishing and humiliating method of communicating our disappointment but we embrace the method and the product as the best means of earning further respect and reaffirming the public's trust.

As Sheriff, I care immensely about how the Agency performs for the people we serve and equally for the reputations and families of the professionals that I serve with. There is nothing dearer in our profession than integrity, other than life itself. Integrity in law enforcement agencies is the building block of honor and trust. There is no easy path to integrity; a professional member must accept the choices of denial of both self and personal gratification while exercising unrelenting courage in deed and moral commitment.

The actions of less than one percent of our Agency who sully our reputations and violate our oath does not diminish the reality of valiant service and the conventions of sacrifice of time, family relations, wealth and, sometimes, life itself that our professional members commit to the public. One percent can never define the 99 percent who are operating professionals.

The more recent examples of Agency action against unacceptable conduct serves to reinforce our resolve for excellence and perfection of our professional reputations. We wholesale reject conduct that is inconsistent with our oaths and policy. We will continue to seek out and eliminate unacceptable and improper conduct in order to maintain the high standards that we have set for ourselves.

The Collier County Sheriff's Office is recognized nationally as an accredited agency that employs best practices with conforming policy and procedure. In fact we qualify as a "Flagship Agency" with the international Commission for the Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies. While there are 582 accredited law enforcement agencies nationwide only 72 have been recognized as flagship agencies. Best practices incorporate accountability functions that are used to monitor members' and authenticate our actions.

We have found no "bright line" guidance in predicting or controlling human behaviors and its' aberrations; in the final analysis psychology is art with science and psychiatry defines the organic condition without a terminal fix. Both help us to **manage** the human condition and its' radical permutations without a **cure** for the diversities in personality that we encounter in **every** workplace. Though we utilize the most modern and accurate testing to screen out radical behavior irregularities in our selection process, we nor ANY law enforcement organization will ever be 100% successful owing to limitations in the testing instruments and attempts to defeat these tests by the applicants tested.

Our quality assurance features assist us in affirming an applicant / recruit's proper fit with our agency and appropriateness for public service. Our selection process for new members is dictated

by Agency policy in compliance with state and federal regulations. The process is the most stringent permitted by law. We incorporate written aptitude tests, oral interviews by subject matter experts and human resource professionals, polygraph examination, medical examination, drug screening, psychological assessments and a thorough background investigation. The background investigation includes local, state and federal criminal history checks, fingerprinting, prior employment and personal references, credit history, neighborhood reference checks, military history and more. Our process is comparable to that employed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, another agency with intent to hire only the most qualified to serve.

For law enforcement and corrections deputies we incorporate a rigorous academy, state competency testing, a 12 week field training officer program, a one year probationary period of review and an annual evaluation of performance. All of this is designed to insure that we have the right members to serve.

In 2006, 92 percent of our applicants (there were more than 1,000 applicants) did not complete our rigorous applicant screening process. Of those candidates selected, 4.7 percent did not complete the academy training and another 2.3 percent did not successfully complete the field training officer program. Yet even with this candidate and recruit fail rate we will not compromise on hiring standards. Each review of applicants is conducted with all due care and all considered qualifying criteria is objectively evaluated with the preservation of the Agency's and the public's interest made the paramount concerns.

Nationwide, the applicant pool has diminished in both numbers and quality. As more baby boomers reach the age of retirement, the labor pool shrinks. Job seekers are turning away from the law enforcement arena in favor of careers that offer more pay, traditional day shift hours, fewer risks, less public scrutiny, less physical danger and less stress.

According to a Seattle Times News article released February 7, 2007 (by Sara Jean Green):
“... ‘the federal Department of Homeland Security is competing for the same people local police departments are looking to recruit,’ said Chuck Wexler, Executive Director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C. based think tank representing the country’s largest police departments...”

“Finding people to fill all the law enforcement job openings ‘is a national problem – and its’ going from being a national problem to a national crisis,’ Wexler said.”

We realize that there is a small pool of the willing who want a career in law enforcement. But from that group there exists an even smaller pool of eligible (U.S. citizen, minimum of 18 years old, no prior felony arrests etc.) and qualified (acceptable test results, acceptable polygraph/psychological/drug screening test results). From these small pools we compete with other law enforcement agencies in the recruitment wars now underway in our nation for officers. We seek people who are not ethically challenged, who have the right interpersonal skills, who have a strong emotional constitution and who exhibit mental and physical courage.

Generational issues are also becoming patent. Applicants have become job seekers not career seekers. Commitment and dedication to a law enforcement career has many times played second to personal time, vacation time and hobby.

Under such competition for limited numbers of people and with an inherent attribute that the member is not committed to a career but rather sees the position as an expendable job we can expect the member to be transient. Regrettably, when a person is willing to forfeit their job and

move to the next easily acquired job their interest in conforming to policy and practice of the Agency is lessened to a dangerous degree. I believe that this scenario may be more prevalent than we realize.

I am convening a group of human resource professionals, psychological practitioners and law enforcement experts to review with me our applicant screening practices as well as our retention and integrity check mechanisms to insure we are fully operationalizing all opportunities to produce integrity in our group.

The physically, mentally and morally courageous members of the Collier County Sheriff's Office deserve your unqualified support and trust.

Those who do not have the character and integrity that we demand simply need not apply.

Don Hunter, Sheriff
Collier County