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Traffic Safety's Critical Role in the Law Enforcement Mission

LEADERSHIP IS AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND EVERY MEMBER OF AN AGENCY FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE TO FIELD TRAINING OFFICERS SHOULD STRIVE TO BOTH LEAD AND PROVIDE GUIDANCE TO PERSONNEL THAT RESULTS IN LONG-TERM BENEFITS FOR BOTH THE AGENCY AND THE COMMUNITY IT SERVES. THERE ARE NUMEROUS FACTORS AND CHANGING SITUATIONS THAT NEGATIVELY IMPACT EVERY COMMUNITY, AND, AS A RESULT, AN AGENCY'S PRIORITIES ARE CONSTANTLY SHIFTING.

One of the factors that is omnipresent is traffic safety. Illegal and unsafe driving are problems that negatively impact every community. From crashes and the related problems that result from them to neighborhood complaints about speeding and other violations, traffic safety is a daily issue affecting law enforcement; as such, traffic safety should be a core component of every agency's overall mission.

While the first reaction to this statement may be "sure, we do traffic," often, traffic enforcement is sometimes viewed as a "have to do," but not a "need to do." Also, at times, traffic-related activities are decreased due to factors such as shifting priorities and assignments, increased calls for service, decreased personnel levels, and so forth. It is important to understand why maintaining or, in some cases, beginning or enhancing a comprehensive traffic safety program is important and how this activity can provide myriad benefits to a community and enhanced overall public safety.

First of all, as simple as this statement may sound, traffic enforcement is law enforcement! Every traffic stop is basically an investigation. Did the motorist knowingly commit the violation? Are there extenuating circumstances? Is the driver impaired and, if so, by what means? Are the occupants of the vehicle really who they say they are? Is there additional criminal activity beyond the initial reason for the stop? With a crash investigation, especially in a serious crash, an in-depth investigation must be conducted. What actions or factors contributed to the crash? Are there traffic violations and, if so, what are they? Is the driver impaired? Is the driver properly licensed? What other factors might have contributed to the crash? Investigators must interview witnesses, examine physical evidence, determine the minimum initial speed each vehicle was traveling, determine if there are possible vehicle defects, take measurements and photos, do scale drawings, and carry out other related investigative tasks. The skills required for these law enforcement duties are similar to any other investigation—and it's just as important that these investigations be taken seriously and be performed with diligence.

A comprehensive traffic safety plan can benefit a community and its residents in many ways, including reducing unsafe driving, contributing to investigations, and improving community-police relations. In order to capitalize on a traffic safety plan's full potential, it is necessary to examine the different areas that can be affected and the components that can be initiated by an agency.

DECREASING CRASHES AND UNSAFE DRIVING

When one speaks of traffic safety, the mission of reducing crashes and unsafe driving is understandably what most people think of first—and with good reason. Most law enforcement personnel are familiar with crash data, but the numbers are worth mentioning. Every year, crashes kill or seriously injure people while also costing millions in medical, lost property, and other costs. In 2017, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported that 37,133 people were killed in traffic crashes in the United States. While efforts in enforcement, education, engineering, and EMS have slightly decreased this number in the past few years, the current death and injury rates on U.S. roadways are still alarming. This is not only a traffic safety problem, but

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also a public health problem. What do data show about the impact on your community? How can law enforcement improve this dangerous condition and better safeguard community members? The answer is clearly a comprehensive traffic safety program, and a variety of efforts and initiatives can be conducted by a single department or, as has been done in many jurisdictions, by multiple agencies working together in a single operation, thus expanding the area covered by the initiative and using collaboration as a force multiplier.

CRIME AND TRAFFIC SAFETY

Effective and balanced traffic enforcement can often lead to the discovery of or leads for other criminal offenses. One need only look to general news sources to see cases where an initial traffic stop led to additional criminal investigations or arrests. From driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs, to the possession of narcotics or firearms, to human trafficking and wanted persons, traffic stops often are the foundation for other criminal arrests. With good investigative skills, traffic stops can often result in additional charges. As a result, increasing traffic enforcement does have the potential to also increase other types of criminal apprehensions.

It is also important to monitor, analyze, and understand the relationship between crime and traffic safety in a jurisdiction. Using the Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety (DDACTS) model can greatly enhance an agency's analysis of both crash and crime activity and the nexus between them. This NHTSA program, developed in partnership with the IACP and several other organizations, provides the framework for analysis of timely and accurate data as they relate to both traffic enforcement and crashes and to crime and has proven very useful in effective analysis and personnel deployments. Additional information on DDACTS can be found on NHTSA's website at www.nhtsa.gov.

TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT AS A COMPONENT OF COMMUNITY POLICING

For many community members, a traffic stop may be the only contact that they will ever have with law enforcement, so educating people about the importance of traffic safety is a key factor in these encounters. Just issuing a citation negates an opportunity to positively interact with community members. It is important that they understand the dangers of unsafe driving and the heartache that it has the potential to cause them and others. Officers need to ensure that community members understand that traffic enforcement is not done for revenue generation and is conducted in locations where data show that dangers exist or when a violation is observed. Some agencies offer motorists a pamphlet explaining how or why traffic safety benefits their community. There are obviously several options that law enforcement personnel have when stopping a person for an offense. There is a citation, a warning ticket, or an oral warning, among other options, but the most important actions are terminating the offense and educating the offender. Having community members understand the importance of traffic safety and the positive impact that it can have on their quality of life through both enforcement and educational efforts, such as child safety seat checks, pedestrian and bicycle safety, impaired driving informational sessions, and other activities, can be an integral part of a community policing model.

ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS

There are numerous organizations, both public and private, that are available to assist an agency with its traffic safety mission. One of the most important is a state's Highway Safety Office (SHSO). Every law enforcement agency should maintain a good relationship with its SHSO and take advantage of its expertise and resources. In addition to NHTSA and SHSOs, the following allied organizations can assist agencies with a variety of matters, including data and analysis, programs, material, and subject matter expertise:

- American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA)
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
- Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA)
- Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)
- Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility (FAAR)
- Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA)
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
- National Safety Council (NSC)
- Safe Kids Worldwide

Additionally, IACP's Highway Safety Committee is a resource for IACP members. The committee comprises representatives from international, federal, state, county, and municipal agencies, along with representatives from allied organizations. The committee and its members are available to assist IACP members with traffic safety issues.

From a serious vehicle crash, to a resident's complaint of cars speeding through the neighborhood and endangering children, to other problems caused by traffic-related issues, law enforcement agencies are impacted by traffic safety on a daily basis. Maintaining a comprehensive traffic safety program consisting of data-driven enforcement, education, and engineering as a core component of an agency's mission will serve to enhance public safety, work as a part of community policing efforts, and ultimately produce positive benefits. Traffic safety should always be mission critical for both the agency and its personnel.