Improving Recruitment and Retention in the New Orleans Police Department

Abstract
Following Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) has suffered from serious recruiting and retention problems. Drawing on decades of experience and on interviews with members of the NOPD, RAND researchers identified some initiatives in five areas that, when tailored to NOPD circumstances, could help the NOPD address these problems and would carry modest or no additional costs to the city.

Hurricane Katrina and the flooding that followed largely disabled the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) and other city first responders. These organizations ended up becoming as much victims of the storm as the people of New Orleans they were supposed to help. Subsequently, the NOPD has suffered from unusually high rates of departure from the force and an inability to recruit new officers.

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Lessons That Might Help Address the NOPD’s Recruiting and Retention Problems
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Compensation. Providing a competitive level of compensation is essential for the NOPD’s long-term viability, but unfortunately, NOPD salaries are noncompetitive relative to those in other, comparable cities. Most notable is the failure in the past few years to pay increases to grades of Police Officer 2, 3, and 4 (PO2–PO4) after officers pass the examinations that qualify them for promotion. Not only does this hinder retention, it also hinders the department’s ability to attract new recruits and motivate current officers. Directly correcting the pay problem is critical to improving retention.

The study stressed the need for the city to follow through on promises for pay increases as patrolmen advance through the junior ranks.
Finally, given that the city is likely to acquire a stock of relatively good housing, officials might want to consider using housing as non-cash payment in-kind for signing a contract committing a police officer to some number of years of service.

**Career Progression and Promotion.** Promotion examinations are supposed to be held every three years, but as many as five years pass between examinations. Officers are promoted on the basis of their examination scores, with the department moving down the list of qualified candidates over time as need arises. Unfortunately, many of those not promoted to fill immediate needs leave rather than wait for a distant future examination that may move them up the list, often leaving the department with those at the bottom of the list. Having more-frequent examinations and convening promotion boards every 12 to 18 months to qualify (pass) only enough officers each cycle to fill vacancies between the more-frequent examinations can help improve the quality of those promoted, raise morale, and assist in retention.

**Recruiting.** Current NOPD efforts to recruit new officers seem insufficient, with uniformed officers devoted more to processing candidates who have already volunteered than to actively recruiting them. RAND suggests a more proactive approach that would field officers with specific recruiting goals. Over the longer term, this program could be augmented with a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps–type or school-based program.

Such a program could include after-school employment during the school year, summer employment between grades, and post–high school graduation employment as civilian employees until the recruits are eligible to become uniformed officers.

**Civilian/Officer Mix.** During visits, RAND researchers found officers doing jobs civilians could do. Given the current shortage of officers, the NOPD should be aggressive in ensuring that all uniformed personnel are assigned to duties they are uniquely qualified to perform.

**Morale.** The whole infrastructure of the criminal justice system was a casualty of the flooding and its aftermath; much of the NOPD is still working out of trailers. Priority should be given to rebuilding police facilities, including headquarters and the district stations, as quickly as possible, especially since much of this can be done with funds from the federal government.

**The Way Forward**
Mayor Ray Nagin and RAND released the study to the public jointly at a press conference at City Hall in New Orleans in March 2007. At that time, the Mayor noted that the city had already acted upon several of the RAND recommendations, most notably, increasing the pay of junior patrolmen and (with the New Orleans Civil Service Commission) moving to increase the frequency of the promotion examinations. ■
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