

# Amplifying the Speakers

## Identifying High-Priority Needs for Law Enforcement Public Information Officers

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of public information officers (PIOs) within law enforcement agencies has expanded over time, as have the potential barriers to success for PIOs and their agencies (Davis, 2010). As law enforcement agencies continue to respond to high-profile critical incidents, an unprecedented pandemic, new and constantly changing technologies and communication media, and a growing expectation of rapid communication and transparency from law enforcement, the importance of the PIO as the public face of the agency has grown. The PIO is often the focal point for disseminating information to the public, gathering feedback from the community, and leading efforts toward greater transparency in law enforcement operations. Nevertheless, few studies have explored the role of the PIO in law enforcement; there is a need for additional research and guidance to inform evidence-based practices on a variety of related issues.

To better understand the needs of the police with respect to PIOs, the RAND Corporation and the Police Executive Research Forum, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, convened a workshop on law enforcement PIOs. Through a series of interviews and virtual group engagements held in April 2021, staff gathered input from workshop participants on the challenges faced by law enforcement PIOs and what is needed to improve and support them. These efforts culminated in the identification and prioritization of a list of needs for law enforcement PIOs, where a *need* is defined as a problem or opportunity and the potential solution that addresses it. The workshop resulted in the identification and prioritization of a total of 26 needs. These needs were subsequently sorted into four categories using common themes:

- **strategy and best practice**, with eight needs
- **organizational issues**, with seven needs
- **sharing information and building trust**, with six needs
- **public communications staff development**, with five needs.

This report lists these needs and provides additional context on the nine needs that participants ranked as the highest priority.

### SELECTED PRIORITY NEEDS



#### RESULTS

##### Strategy and best practice

- A guide to regularly gauge community sentiment and priorities should be disseminated.
- Guidance should be created for rapid response strategies for leadership and public communications staff that establish consistent, clear timelines for information release.

##### Organizational issues

- Best practices and training for executives and public information officers (PIOs) should address the benefits of an increased role for a PIO in delivering internal messaging, in addition to conducting externally facing responsibilities.
- Published guidance and training for executives should incorporate information on characteristics of effective PIOs, appropriate PIO roles and responsibilities (especially in small or midsized agencies), and benefits and trade-offs when hiring sworn or civilian PIOs.

##### Sharing information and building trust

- Guidance should be created for PIOs on investing time and resources to identify, evaluate, and respond to recent and long-standing community concerns and on appropriate local responses to incidents that may affect policing nationally.
- Communications plans should be created that provide tactics that a PIO can authentically adapt to local sensitivities to give constructive responses to known criticisms.

##### Public communications staff development

- Professional networks and information-sharing for PIOs should be built through networking and information-sharing events.
- Low-cost training or partnership opportunities should be created for law enforcement PIOs on building comprehensive, consistent communications strategies spanning multiple platforms, engagement types, and types of media.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Participants emphasized a simple need for greater awareness of the ways that public communications staff can contribute to the overall success of policing. PIOs can be critical assets for improving internal communication within agencies, gathering community input to inform policy and strategy, building relationships and trust with communities over time, and building rapport with a variety of stakeholders. As stakeholders increasingly expect rapid responsiveness and transparency from law enforcement agencies, PIOs can act as key liaisons between agencies and communities because PIOs drive the effective gathering and dissemination of the information needed to help agencies be responsive to community concerns. Participants noted that PIOs are expected to present excellence at every opportunity because they are the public face of law enforcement agencies. Like law enforcement officers, PIOs need training, resources, and the trust of leadership to meet that expectation. Other key takeaways from the workshop are as follows:

- Participants noted that there were benefits and trade-offs when using either sworn or civilian staff in public communications roles but that it is key that an agency maintain continuity in the role and that staff treat public communications as a core part of their responsibilities. It is critical for a PIO or those with public communications responsibilities to invest in building long-term relationships with

the community and within the agency, and it is detrimental to the agency to regularly cycle staff through the role.

- PIOs can provide a wide variety of benefits to an agency beyond just disseminating information to the public. Participants described how PIOs can be used to improve internal communication, improve recruiting, engage the community to guide policy and strategy, gather data in support of budgetary requests to municipal stakeholders, and more. Overall, participants suggested that police executives would benefit from training and guidance on how to optimize the role of a PIO within their agencies.
- Participants discussed the needs of PIOs with respect to responding to community tensions and critical incidents. PIOs and executives should receive training to proactively understand community needs and long-standing issues so that agencies are prepared when tensions rise in the aftermath of policing incidents (whether incidents occur locally or elsewhere in the nation). In addition to guidance on proactively preparing, PIOs would benefit from regionally focused case studies and other guidance on how best to respond during civil unrest.
- Agencies need to invest in their PIOs as they invest in their officers. Public communicators have a significant impact on the agency, and PIOs need regular training, networking opportunities, and guidance to perform well in the role.

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## INTRODUCTION

The ability to effectively and efficiently communicate information to the public is of critical value to modern police departments, especially in light of community concerns over transparency and accountability in policing. An agency's proficiency in engaging the media and the community, particularly over sensitive or controversial matters, can have a major impact on how citizens perceive the department and the policing profession in general. Significant literature exists documenting how communication strategies of policing agencies have changed over time and how those strategies affect perceptions of police legitimacy (Chermak and Weiss, 2005; Davis, 2010; Lee and McGovern, 2013; Mawby, 2002; Nhan and Noakes, 2020; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Much of the work from the past ten years involves analysis of the connection between police communication and perceptions of legitimacy through the lens of procedural justice (Mazerolle et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> This literature includes experiments examining the impact of procedural justice in police encounters on attitudes toward police (Maguire, Lowrey, and Johnson, 2017), the impact of media consumption habits on the relationship between procedural justice and police legitimacy (Graziano and Gauthier, 2018), and interventions to improve public trust of police through dialogue between police and community groups (Hill, Giles, and Maguire, 2021). Much of this research revolves, directly or indirectly, around the impact of police communication tools and strategies on perceptions of procedural justice and police legitimacy.

Social media has been and continues to be an important tool for policing agencies in this respect, especially in the context of crisis communications. A significant body of literature addresses the utility of social media in crisis communication in general contexts (Eriksson, 2018; Wang, Cheng, and Sun, 2021). Other research has examined specific instances of law enforcement use of social media for crisis communications; examples of such research include a comparison of North American police department social media strategies (Meijer and Thaens, 2013) and a case study of police social media use during a mall shooting (Fowler, 2017). Research has also been conducted on more-general police use of social media for a variety of other purposes (Nhan and Noakes, 2020). One study of police use of Twitter found that the direct communication channel with the public slightly improved perceptions of transparency and police legitimacy, although more work was needed to understand what made for a successful communication strategy with this platform (Grimmelikhuisen and Meijer, 2015).



## PARTICIPANTS

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As police agencies have started to recognize the need for effective communication, the position of public information officer (PIO) has become vital, especially with respect to public image (Davis, 2010). The role of the PIO is generally centered on building relationships with the media, keeping up with communication trends, and spearheading training and

## ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
NIJ	National Institute of Justice
PCJNI	Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative
PERF	Police Executive Research Forum
PIO	public information officer

education initiatives (National Information Officers Association, 2021). Although agency needs for public communications vary, PIOs can perform numerous duties, including the following: drafting press releases and coordinating press conferences; drafting speeches for agency executives; directly addressing the public through various forms of media (especially social media); responding to media and public requests; assessing public opinion of the agency; and, in general, serving as liaisons between the agency, other governmental entities, the media, and the community (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In many respects, the PIO is often the most direct link between an agency and the citizenry it serves. Because the PIO's responsibilities generally require them to maintain relationships and act as the liaison between many different parties, both internal and external to a policing agency, the PIO is also potentially well positioned to positively influence each of the six pillars described in the 2015 report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.<sup>2</sup>

Little has been written regarding PIOs in the context of policing, although how other public services develop relationships with and address the public has been explored in some detail (Motschall and Cao, 2002). Although there is no reliable historical record that establishes when or where the first PIO in a police department was created, many believe it can be traced to the turmoil of the 1960s, when there was public outcry in response to racism and injustice that triggered a reform movement demanding more-direct interaction between police and the community (Rumbaut and Bittner, 1979). Motschall and Cao, 2002, also argue that PIO positions emerged in response to community demands for transparency from public agencies regarding operations and activities, particularly when it came to tactics used by police to address volatile situations. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967, and the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, 1973, were two groups that strongly recommended action to shift focus onto stronger community and news relations to remedy the negative perceptions growing around police agencies. Additionally, the

Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies was formed in 1979 with the intent, in part, to assist law enforcement agencies to maintain high standards of public information (Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, 1989).

The PIO position in police departments was originally intended to be filled by sworn personnel, but over time it has become more open to civilian employees with backgrounds in journalism or communications (Motschall and Cao, 2002). The purpose of this shift to civilian employees was to open the position to a larger pool of individuals specifically trained in the talents that are important for a PIO, including the interpersonal skills necessary to regularly interact with diverse groups, the organizational skills necessary to coordinate multiple schedules and projects, the problem-solving skills necessary to manage sensitive and controversial topics, and the communication skills necessary to effectively write and speak in public (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Roberts, 2019). Additionally, this shift not only places individuals with experience communicating complex ideas in suitable positions but also may help increase public trust. Many agencies hope that, if they build this trust, the public will be more open to putting specific critical events in perspective and will not lose trust in the entire department (Motschall and Cao, 2002).

Despite various attempts to standardize and reform the methods used by police to engage with the public, there are challenges to PIOs presented by such factors as widespread media attention, increased relevance of social media, lack of resources, issues with internal culture, and various social movements calling attention to such issues as use of force and corruption (Davis, 2010; Motschall and Cao, 2002). These challenges are compounded by high-profile critical incidents in the years leading up to and following the murder of George Floyd, an unprecedented viral pandemic, and new and constantly changing forms of technology that allow for rapid dissemination of information by the public. PIOs could be invaluable assets for policing agencies to prevent misinformation, increase perceptions of transparency, and bridge communication gaps, if they can overcome the many challenges encountered by law enforcement communicators (Perry, 2020).

To better understand the challenges associated with the position of the PIO, the RAND Corporation and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), on behalf of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), convened a workshop with a diverse group of practitioners to discuss existing practices associated with PIOs and identify what needs exist that can support and

## The PIO is often the most direct link between an agency and the citizenry it serves.

improve their efforts (see the “Participants” box for a full list of names and affiliations). Key topics involved the challenges of working with various media, the complexities of communication with the public (especially during critical events), and the core competencies of effective PIOs and how these traits can be cultivated within an agency.

### METHODOLOGY

To investigate needs related to law enforcement PIOs, RAND and PERF convened and facilitated a workshop. This workshop was one of many conducted on various issues on behalf of NIJ by the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative (PCJNI), a research partnership between RAND, PERF, RTI International, and the University of Denver. The goal of the workshop was to gather relevant experts, practitioners, and other stakeholders to identify a set of prioritized recommendations that would be used to inform the research and policy agenda of NIJ.

As an initial step in preparing for the workshop, RAND and PERF reviewed literature relevant to the use of PIOs in law enforcement and the challenges agencies face. This literature review helped both to inform the initial scope and subject matter of the engagement and to identify an initial list of potential participants. Additional participants were identified and invited through consultation with federal partners and police executives with knowledge of the PIO position. When creating the initial list of potential participants, project staff sought to create a group that could bring a broad spectrum of perspectives to engage in a robust and open discussion of the issues affecting law enforcement PIOs. The final group was composed of ten police practitioners (consisting of four sworn officers and six civilian staff), two individuals from the Vera Institute of Justice, one retired journalist, and one communications consultant.

The typical PCJNI process for similar engagements with criminal justice stakeholders involves a two-day, in-person engagement. Because of the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, however, the process was modified

to instead gather input from interviews with participants, followed by a series of three group engagements with all participants together on Zoom, a video meeting platform. Twelve interviews were performed over a period of four weeks prior to the group sessions. The information gathered from these interviews was used to compile a preliminary list of needs. This list was sent to participants for their review ahead of the workshop. The group engagements occurred on April 27 and April 29, 2021, via Zoom, with one two-hour session occurring the first day and two two-hour sessions occurring the second day.

The workshop explored specific programming and issues related to having PIO programs or units that have been developed or will develop in the short term (i.e., within five years). The discussion focused on four themes centered on policy and practice of PIO units in law enforcement agencies: strategy and best practice, organizational issues, sharing information and building trust, and public communications staff development. To facilitate the workshop discussion, we used our judgment to sort the preliminary versions of the needs derived from the interviews into four themes prior to the interactive group sessions.

During the group sessions, participants were introduced to and led through a series of pairings of problems and associated needs in a semistructured discussion. Over the course of the discussions, the content of the preliminary list of needs was dynamically edited with input from participants. They directed the creation of new needs, the removal of others, and the combination of some needs. During the workshop, participants provided input when a new or edited need fit better with a different theme, and the final needs were sorted into those same themes.

Following the discussion in each theme, experts participated in a ranking exercise to identify the most-important needs. Results were then clustered into top, middle, and bottom tiers through the use of the Delphi method, a technique developed at RAND to elicit expert opinion about well-defined questions in a systematic and structured way (RAND Corporation, undated). Additional details on the methods for structuring the workshop, identifying participants, and prioritizing the needs, along with identified limitations of these methods, are discussed in the technical appendix.

## RESULTS

Many participants entered into the discussion by first noting that there was a simple need for a public emphasis that the role of the PIO is critical to the overall success of policing. As one participant said, “the role of the PIO needs to be acknowledged as a critical part of agency infrastructure.” Participants suggested that, for many agencies, thinking about the PIO role as something pivotal to the success of the agency is a new perspective. They suggested that there was a need to understand the importance of public communications roles, even in agencies that do not have a dedicated PIO. Many small agencies do not have the resources for a dedicated PIO, but they still need someone with expertise in the role. As one participant put it, “small cities can have large problems.” Furthermore, no agency is completely isolated anymore. Participants noted that communications failures in one agency can have widespread effects on others throughout the nation.

Given these initial perspectives, participants emphasized that PIOs and those with similar responsibilities in the agency need guidance, information, and skills to do the job properly. PIOs have a complicated place in the agency. They are the liaison between the agency and the community; therefore, they need to be culturally integrated in both. Moreover, the PIO role cannot just be about telling and amplifying the agency’s side of a story. As one participant noted, “Realize that you won’t change hearts and minds through a Facebook post. You’ll change them through genuine community interactions.” The role needs to be about building trust with a community, responding to a community’s needs, communicating success stories and how the agency is responding, advocating for the agency’s needs to accomplish its mission, and closing the gap between officers and the community by helping officers and those they serve understand that they are all part of the same community.

Upon the conclusion of the workshop, participants had identified a total of 26 needs relating to PIOs:

- **strategy and best practice**, with eight associated needs
- **organizational issues**, with seven associated needs
- **sharing information and building trust**, with six associated needs
- **public communications staff development**, with five associated needs.

Following the prioritization session (described in greater detail in the appendix), we sorted the needs into tiers of priority

using the participant rankings according to importance and probability of success. Nine of the needs fell into the top tier, 14 into the middle tier, and three into the bottom tier. We label the *top-tier* needs as high-priority needs, and the nine high-priority needs are shown in Table 1. These needs were nearly evenly split among the four themes, with *strategy and best practice* containing three needs and each of the other themes containing two each. These high-priority needs are discussed in greater detail in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

This section provides further context from the workshop discussion on the high-priority needs. It is organized around needs in these categories:

- strategy and best practice
- organizational issues
- sharing information and building trust
- public communications staff development.

Statements in this section are derived from assertions of the workshop participants and the ensuing discussion. Any other cited work is included only where it provides context relevant to workshop discussion.

### Strategy and Best Practice

Participants noted that civil unrest (whether spontaneous or a planned and recurring event) and other events considered *critical incidents* are a major challenge for PIOs.<sup>3</sup> They suggested that large-scale demonstrations had the potential to be both a challenge and an opportunity. Critical incidents are a challenge because they carry a risk of high-profile adversarial interactions between officers and the community, and these interactions could further damage public trust in the agency. They are also an opportunity in that they may be indicators of some specific problem the agency has overlooked, and they could provide the needed nudge for the agency to engage community stakeholders, listen, and change course to better serve the community. Effective public communications staff could be the deciding factor to determine whether the event leads to better or worse relationships between the agency and the community it serves.

Participants noted the need for regionally focused case studies that can help guide agencies and PIOs in how to respond to critical incidents of this kind. They noted that guid-

**Table 1. Nine Top-Tier Needs**

<b>Problem or Opportunity</b>	<b>Potential Solution</b>
<b>Strategy and best practice</b>	
<p>Protests and civil unrest create a distinct and enduring challenge for police PIOs. These events carry the risk of adversarial interactions that can damage trust in law enforcement. They also can serve as opportunities to demonstrate that an agency is willing to listen to the community's concerns and invite community leaders to provide input.<sup>a</sup></p>	<p>Have national organizations create regionally focused case studies identifying potential pitfalls and effective strategies for public communications specifically related to protests, civil unrest, and other challenging events. Include recommendations on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• merging communications plans with tactical plans</li> <li>• communicating clear goals for police response with priority on ensuring the right of members of the public to safely express their views</li> <li>• performing targeted outreach and response to hear and meet needs of different community stakeholders</li> <li>• creating unified messaging and a unified strategy with other offices and/or agencies that demonstrate a consistent, professional response.</li> </ul>
<p>Many departments are still not prepared to effectively communicate with the public, and agencies or PIOs might not recognize when they need help in their communications strategies.<sup>a</sup></p>	<p>Disseminate a guide to regularly gauge community sentiment and priorities, including a list of different tools that could be used (surveys, social media, apps, audits, etc.), estimates of the resource investments that they require, descriptions of their benefits and limitations, and potential alternative funding sources for them (e.g., grants, philanthropy).</p>
<p>Agencies are often not communicating quickly enough with the public during critical incidents. Agencies often need to transition from thinking of communication as “pleasing the media and meeting their deadlines” to “what does the public need to hear and when?”</p>	<p>Create guidance for rapid response strategies for leadership and public communications staff that establish consistent, clear timelines for information release (e.g., critical incident checklist, crisis communications plans, better use of social media, policies that facilitate rapid release of information). Include guidelines for updating information over time.</p>
<b>Organizational issues</b>	
<p>Many agency leaders still do not understand the full value and potential of an effective PIO. They do not understand how investing in the role can improve multiple outcomes for the agency beyond public perception (e.g., informing policing strategy, improving recruiting, building relationships with elected officials, achieving officer buy-in on leadership decisions). It can be challenging to achieve leadership buy-in to the idea that a dedicated PIO or more communication training for officers would be worth the resources required, especially for smaller agencies.<sup>a</sup></p>	<p>In best practices and training for executives and PIOs, address the benefits of an increased role for a PIO in delivering internal messaging, in addition to conducting externally facing responsibilities. A PIO can, e.g., contribute to greater internal transparency on decisionmaking and communication of community sentiment, leading to better buy-in from line staff on engagement strategy and improved morale.</p>
<p>When staffing the office, agencies may not understand what expertise and qualities make for a good PIO, especially with respect to differences between large and small agencies and the benefits, trade-offs, and return on investment of using sworn versus civilian staff in the role (e.g., agencies will often assign officers to the role as a short-term learning opportunity rather than staffing a dedicated professional who can build long-term relationships).</p>	<p>In published guidance and training for executives, incorporate guidance on characteristics of effective PIOs, appropriate PIO roles and responsibilities (especially in small or mid-sized agencies), and benefits and trade-offs when hiring sworn or civilian PIOs (e.g., with respect to the PIO's ability to build and maintain relationships; retention and consistency in the position; skills and experience in such things as incident response or on-camera work; and integration in the department culture).</p>

Table 1—Continued

Problem or Opportunity	Potential Solution
<b>Sharing information and building trust</b>	
<p>PIO offices are often reactive rather than proactive, communicating how departments are addressing ongoing, predictable, or long-standing issues of concern to their communities.</p>	<p>Create guidance for PIOs on investing time and resources to identify, evaluate, and respond to recent and long-standing community concerns (e.g., monitoring trends on social media) and on appropriate local responses to incidents that may affect policing nationally. PIOs need to examine and state how agencies will address local issues before a crisis occurs. Reach out to neighboring agencies who have addressed certain issues well.</p>
<p>Agencies often adopt a reflexively defensive attitude toward public criticism that focuses on how events affect the agency, often coupled with a distrust toward the media. This can prevent them from fostering relationships that could help them hear community concerns, craft effective messaging on agency responses, and demonstrate a department and officers that share community values.</p>	<p>Create communications plans that provide tactics that a PIO can authentically adapt to local sensitivities to give constructive responses to known criticisms. Include guidance on how certain responses may address the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including those in the agency.</p>
<b>Public communications staff development</b>	
<p>PIOs often lack resources they can turn to for quick-turn advice and guidance in incident response or crises. Agencies often do not have or know where to find resources on effective public communications strategies (especially smaller agencies that may not have a dedicated PIO role).<sup>a</sup></p>	<p>Build professional networks and information-sharing for PIOs through networking and information-sharing events, such as association memberships, conferences, Zoom meetings, or webinars. These could be promoted or disseminated through existing regional, state, and national organizations and associations.</p>
<p>Many agencies do not have consistent, comprehensive communications strategies that coordinate messaging across multiple channels to reach intended audiences (beyond just social media).<sup>a</sup></p>	<p>Create low-cost training or partnership opportunities (e.g., shadowing similar agency PIOs) for law enforcement PIOs on building comprehensive, consistent communications strategies spanning multiple platforms, engagement types, and types of media.</p>

<sup>a</sup> Indicates that this problem or opportunity is associated with at least one other potential solution that did not fall into the top tier of needs (i.e., the other needs were not identified as high-priority). Other associated solutions can be found in the full list of needs in the appendix.

ance and case studies can build on work that has already been done and that such case studies should include recommendations on at least four specific areas:

- First, communication plans and tactical plans need to be merged in the agency response to a demonstration; they should be part of the same response plan so that one cannot take precedence over the other. One participant noted that “the PIO and patrol need to work together. If those two are not together then disaster happens.” Another noted that “everyone needs to have the same mindset, not just the same objective.”
- Second, the agency needs to communicate clear goals for the police response during the event, both to agency staff and to the public. All officers and law enforcement staff engaging in the event need to know what leadership wants executed and why; the public needs to hear agency priorities, especially the goal of ensuring the right of members of

the public to safely express their views. Messaging should focus less on proscribing certain actions and more on creating an environment for stakeholders to be heard. As one participant said, “pivot messaging away from ‘don’t do this’ to ‘slow down, we hear you.’”

- Third, the agency should make a plan to perform targeted outreach to hear the needs and concerns of community stakeholders. Public communications staff need to signal an openness to hear the concerns of demonstrators. “People at these events are upset, and the best thing agencies can do is say ‘we hear you.’” People need to be invited in to the conversation, even those opposing an agency’s position, and they need to be invited to be part of the solution. This often requires visibility into who the community leaders are prior to an event so they can be invited to the table.
- Finally, guidance around civil unrest needs to recommend the creation of unified messaging and strategy among all responders. Agencies should forge and leverage partner-

ships and relationships with other municipal agencies and neighboring police departments. These partners can provide additional support or *surge capacity* during an event, and it is critical that messaging and strategy are shared across all partners to demonstrate a consistent, professional response to all stakeholders in the community and municipal government.

Participants noted that many departments are simply not well prepared to communicate with the public, and many do not even realize this until community frustrations begin to boil over. Participants prioritized a need for guidance to gauge community sentiment and priorities, with a specific focus on the tools that could be used. Participants identified many different types of tools that can be useful for this, and public communications staff need to be able to understand what specific demographics in the community most need to be engaged and how to select the right tools to do so. Communications staff may want to emphasize engagement with demographics that are not already highly engaged with department messaging. This could mean, for example, selecting a specific platform or communication medium because staff know it is highly used by a target demographic. To do this, public communications staff need guidance on the different types of tools available, estimates of the resources required to use them effectively, and descriptions of their benefits and limitations. Participants also discussed how funding issues can constrain a PIO's options and suggested that guidance identify other potential funding sources for these tools where appropriate.

Finally, participants noted that timeliness of communications was a significant challenge for public communications staff, especially during critical incidents. One participant said that “timeliness is everything with public information,” and agencies are not acting with enough urgency to keep up with the accelerating speed of media, especially social media. Agencies may need to focus less on how they are interacting with media entities and meeting media timelines for information release and more on ensuring that the information that police are sharing is dynamic and responsive to community needs, often by availing themselves of tools for engaging the public directly (e.g., social media accounts). Agencies should establish clear expectations for what information will be shared and timelines for that information-sharing. Participants suggested that agencies would benefit from guidance on strategies for rapid response and communication. This would include, for example, guidance on creating crisis communication plans,

critical incident checklists, and social media dissemination strategies. Policies need to emphasize the rapid release of information and articulate plans to update information over time so that all stakeholders know what to expect from law enforcement and when.

## Organizational Issues

Many of the participants noted that police agencies have not yet understood the full value that an effective PIO can bring to the agency, nor what qualities make a PIO effective. Participants identified two high-priority needs to address these issues, both of which were related to creation and dissemination of best practices and training for police executives and public communications staff.

Participants noted that, too often in an agency, the PIO is simply viewed as the “person who speaks to the media.” In those settings, PIOs or public communications staff are treated as the people who are simply tasked with disseminating the agency's perspective to the public, and agencies miss the benefits that an experienced communicator can bring to an agency in multiple areas. Although public communications staff are often rightly understood to have an important role to communicate agency priorities to shape public perception, participants also mentioned their benefits for internal messaging, gathering community and stakeholder input to inform agency priorities and strategy, and improving recruiting efforts, among other benefits. According to one participant, “A competent community relations program does a lot of hard work for an agency.” Workshop participants discussed multiple ways that a PIO can bring value to an agency, including the following:

- providing internal communications to achieve staff buy-in and an understanding of executive decisionmaking
- helping staff understand community perceptions of the agency and officers and what is driving those perceptions
- engaging in public communications to humanize officers, describe agency progress toward stated goals, and build a public perception of agency integration with the community
- gathering public input to guide agency priorities and strategy
- improving recruiting and engaging the community to solve cases
- conducting informed advocacy to municipal stakeholders supporting agency budgetary requests.

Participants discussed at length the PIO's benefits to internal communications. They noted that failures in internal

messaging are a common complaint in organizations. Agencies often settle for simple means of pushing information out to staff, but it is important to ensure that information is being understood, that the intended message is being communicated, and that it is resonating effectively with staff. Participants expressed the view that officers often feel alienated when they hear about department activities from the media, and a PIO can be critical to improve morale and affect the agency's mission by achieving buy-in from line staff. As the staff that can most clearly ascertain what the community's perspective is, PIOs can also help officers understand the effects of their actions on public perception. By doing such things as showing other officers what is happening on calls and social media, PIOs can enhance a staff perspective that can shape officers' actions to more effectively achieve leadership's intention in agency strategy.

Many of the benefits that the participants described require buy-in from leadership; however, a PIO cannot be effective without integration into the culture of the agency. As one person noted, "the message from the top down has to be that you must embrace the PIO" as critical to achieving the agency's mission. Another said, "there needs to be a verbal commitment to the value of the role and its importance to the profession." As part of this cultural integration, some described the importance of the staff being both physically and figuratively located near the agency's executive leadership. A PIO needs to have the trust of the executive: "The chief has to be willing to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly in a constructive way from PIOs." Participants prioritized a need to disseminate best practices and training for executives and PIOs that address the benefits of utilizing public communications staff in these varied roles, including internal messaging and expanded externally facing responsibilities.

Participants also talked at length about the challenge in finding the right people as the public communicators for agencies. They noted that, "just like other officers, the PIO needs to be prepared to show excellence at every opportunity." The PIO is the face of the agency to the community and "this is not a cookie cutter job." As a result, participants prioritized a need

for additional guidance for executives describing the characteristics of effective PIOs, appropriate PIO roles and responsibilities in agencies of various sizes, and the benefits and trade-offs involved in using sworn and nonsworn staff in the role.

The PIO role needs a professional with talent and training in community relations, and the agency needs to be prepared to train and invest in those staff over time. Participants talked at length about the importance of the public communications role at agencies of all sizes (even where agency size did not allow for staff solely dedicated to this role). Agencies with more-limited resources may not invest the resources to have staff primarily focused on the role, but they absolutely do need staff that have public communications as a core piece of their responsibilities, and these staff should be trained and prepared for this role.

Discussion on PIO roles and responsibilities routinely centered on how sworn and nonsworn professional staff were employed in this role. Participants suggested that there needs to be a focus on continuity in the role—in a single person with long-standing relationships and training. Either an officer or professional staff can do well in the role, but continuity is important. Too often, some suggested, agencies treat public communications as a rotational training opportunity, where officers without experience cycle in and out of the role. Participants noted that an officer can be effective, but the officer needs to be dedicated to the role. The individual will need to invest in long-term relationships and partnerships, practice and train in certain skills (e.g., avoiding the use of police jargon), and see public communications as a core part of their role. Some participants expressed that many agencies feel that the public will be more comfortable or perceive a greater sense of stability from seeing a uniformed officer in the PIO role during a crisis. Sworn officers can also more easily understand the experiences of other officers and may find it easier to integrate their public communications responsibilities into the culture of the agency.

Conversely, many participants mentioned the benefits of instead hiring a civilian with experience in media or public relations. Those who know how to manage media relationships and public engagement bring a critical skill set to the role. More-

By doing such things as showing other officers what is happening on calls and social media, PIOs can enhance a staff perspective that can shape officers' actions to more effectively achieve leadership's intention in agency strategy.

over, it may be more straightforward to find civilians who are willing and able to bring a long-term commitment to the role than it would be to find sworn officers. Sometimes it can also be more effective for the public to see a nonsworn staff member (e.g., an outsider from the community’s perspective), but care will need to be taken to ensure that agency staff do not also see the person as an outsider. Participants discussed challenges with cultural integration no matter who was in the role—“it can be a weird space where the media see you as police, but the police see you as media”—but noted that there are effective ways to integrate both sworn and professional staff. They suggested examples, such as sending staff on patrol with officers, locating officers near leadership, and sending officers to spend time in newsrooms or out with reporters. Above all, participants noted that, as of this writing, none of these things are described and laid out in best practices and guidance that describe the trade-offs in decisions made about who will have public communications roles, and this was seen as a significant need.

### Sharing Information and Building Trust

High-priority needs identified as part of *sharing information and building trust* centered on tendencies among agencies and public communications staff to be reactive (rather than proactive) to community concerns or reflexively defensive in the face of criticism. Participants noted that both of these attitudes were counterproductive even where they were understandable, and there were needs for guidance and resources to support PIOs to find more-productive ways to engage, share information, and build trust in communities.

Participants described how, because of either inadequate tools or simple inattention, agencies often have an insufficient understanding of ongoing or long-standing issues affecting their communities. When policing incidents happen locally, in nearby communities, or even nationally and inflame existing tensions, agencies often find themselves in a reactive state, unprepared to respond effectively. Participants suggested that one needed solution to this problem was to create guidance on the need to proactively invest time and resources into identifying, evaluating, and responding to recent and long-standing community concerns. Part of that involves tools and strategies to better gauge community sentiment, such as monitoring trends on social media. Participants further suggested that the more important aspect of this was investing in both training and relationship-building well before an incident occurs. One participant noted that “the failure starts with lack of effort to establish contact with communities before a critical scenario.”

As the participant observed, although critical incidents and demonstrations often grab attention,

reputations are built over time, and critical incidents will reinforce what those reputations have built. If people already know who you are because of your relationships over time, then that’s who you’ll be to the community during an incident.

Another participant said, “the days of ‘trust us, we are the police,’ are gone.” Agencies need to be making “deposits in a trust bank” so that when an issue arises, there is a starting point to work it out with community stakeholders. One participant mentioned the example of partnering with the community on transparency using such apps as the Tallahassee Bystander. The Bystander is an app that allows residents to anonymously record and upload interactions with police, and copies of the video are submitted to the police department and other emergency contacts (Schneider, 2021).

PIOs can be a focal point of an agency’s investment in relationships with the community. Public communications staff have to be in a position where they understand the different perspectives in the community, and they can convey the stance of the agency and how it is responding to those perspectives. Part of that responsibility involves proactive data gathering and data transparency with the community. As the PIO nurtures relationships with the community, they need to understand (and help leadership understand) what data are needed to grasp community issues and how well the agency is or is not addressing them over time. Some participants noted that using the PIO to gather data to inform strategy over time was also critical: “You can have a phenomenal PIO, but if your department is not taking care of business or treating people right, it’s not enough. Messages have to be backed up with actions.” Furthermore, the PIO needs to have a plan to consistently and transparently share gathered data with the community to show how the agency is open and responsive to community concerns. For this strategy to work, agency leadership also needs to have a commitment to transparency. The PIO will be balancing the needs and desires of many stakeholders—agency staff, municipal leaders, and community members—and they need to know that they have the trust of the executive for the transparency strategy that they are undertaking.

Participants suggested that when agencies fail to be proactive and responsive to community concerns, it will inevitably lead to public criticism. Participants frequently lamented that they often perceived agencies and officers adopting a reflexively defensive attitude toward that criticism. Many noted that

although this may be a common and natural human response to criticism, it is also generally counterproductive. One participant noted how their agency had been receiving public criticism over the use of force during recent unrest. Their initial response had been to try to defend their agency and justify officers' actions by showing the public how officers were being attacked during unrest. However, "nobody wanted to hear about police being victims," and that communication strategy only led to more criticism and increasing tensions. As a result, they shifted their strategy toward gathering public input and criticism and communicating how the agency's policy and procedures were being reformed in response. The shift away from a defensive posture had a markedly positive effect and served to reduce tension in the community. This shift is not always easy, and it often involves significant effort poured into engagement with the community and internal communication with officers. Participants noted that officers need to understand the reasons for a shift in strategy and the goals the agency is working toward—the "ends-based strategy"—lest they feel that they have been devalued by leadership or the PIO.

Participants suggested that one of the most-important needs to address reflexively defensive responses among agencies is the proactive creation of communication plans. PIOs need to develop or have access to plans that provide common, successful tactics and strategies that they can adapt to local sensitivities. PIOs need to know the local issues affecting the community so that they understand how the community will react when an incident happens locally or elsewhere in the nation. Once that understanding has been established, they need guidance on constructive responses to known criticisms, including guidance on how certain responses will address the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including officers, municipal leaders, and various community groups.

### **Public Communications Staff Development**

Much of the workshop discussion focused on how agencies invest in their public communications staff and on how agencies can ensure that these staff receive the training and development they need to be effective. Some participants lamented that training for PIOs and other public communications staff is often sparse and inconsistent and that "PIO expertise is perishable." The role involves a wide set of skills that require training and support, including critical incident response, on-camera work, and use of media platforms (especially social media). Moreover, the PIO is the public face of the agency. One participant said that "we expect the best from our officers and we give them the

resources they need, but those resources are often not given to the PIOs." Participants identified two related high-priority needs: (1) to provide PIOs quick-turn advice and guidance for incident response and public communications strategies and (2) to provide comprehensive communications strategies that can be coordinated across multiple channels to reach intended audiences.

Participants suggested that public communications staff, especially those at smaller agencies that may not have a dedicated PIO, often need to quickly know what works when an incident happens. Participants also suggested that there is a need to build and expand professional networks and information-sharing mechanisms for PIOs. Colleagues in the PIO role often have had to address similar issues in their respective agencies. If PIOs have a network of others to turn to, it can provide a valuable resource to guide public communications strategy in a crisis. Participants suggested that PIO conferences, webinars and other online meeting forums, and memberships in professional PIO associations can all help facilitate this networking. They prioritized a need to promote or disseminate information to their PIOs on these resources in existing regional, state, and national organizations and associations for public communications staff.

Finally, participants noted that many agencies have an ad hoc approach to communication and would benefit from having a consistent, comprehensive communication strategy. Such a strategy is most effective when it coordinates messaging across multiple channels (e.g., local news, social media, newsletters, community forums) in a way that can reliably target and reach intended audiences. Participants prioritized a need for low-cost training or partnership opportunities for public communications staff. They suggested that such partnership opportunities could involve allowing public communications staff to shadow PIOs of agencies with similar characteristics or needs. These opportunities should focus on building comprehensive, long-term, and responsive communications strategies that could coordinate messaging across multiple platforms, engagement types, and media types. One participant noted the importance of consistency in the chosen strategy, saying, "how we receive messages and who we receive them from is such a common occurrence we don't think about it, but you have to be ruthlessly consistent with message across all platforms." Participants also noted the importance of reaching the audiences that "aren't already listening to us," and this often involves finding ways to coordinate messaging that are more used by other pockets of the local community.

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## CONCLUSION

Law enforcement agencies have a growing need for proficiency in public communications. Agencies face an expectation from their communities that they will be transparent in their operations and responsive to community calls for information. Policing events that occur at the national level can have significant local impacts if an agency does not respond well to local sensitivities and concerns. PIOs or staff with dedicated public communications responsibilities can be an invaluable resource for agencies as they seek to better achieve their mission through public communications. Despite a growing need for communication proficiency from law enforcement agencies, PIOs have been an underutilized resource, and there have been few attempts to understand what law enforcement PIOs need to improve.

In the workshop held by RAND and PERF to identify and prioritize the most-important needs for improving the profession of law enforcement PIOs, participants identified a total of 26 needs, nine of which were identified as high-priority. These needs were sorted into the following categories: strategy and best practice, organizational issues, sharing information and building trust, and public communications staff development. The high-priority needs addressed issues and potential solutions related to responding to civil unrest; gauging community sentiment; using rapid-response strategies; using PIOs to improve internal messaging; determining characteristics of effective PIOs; proactively building community relationships; responding constructively to criticism of police; and creating better training and networking resources for PIOs.

Participants thought that agencies still did not fully understand the potential value of PIOs. They discussed how PIOs and others in public communications roles have distinct skill sets and positioning in agencies that could allow them to positively impact their agencies in multiple ways, including helping build trust and legitimacy in communities, informing policy, responding to critical incidents, and supporting other agency needs for internal communications. Participants noted, however, that law enforcement communications staff are in need of additional guidance, training, and other resources to help them grow and succeed in their roles. At a time when many policing agencies are searching for ways to proficiently manage the increasingly rapid pace of communication and improve trust in their communities, PIOs may provide an invaluable resource, if they are given the tools that they need to succeed. This report is meant to identify some of the most-pressing needs for PIOs and serve as an initial guide for helping agencies and their public

PIOs or staff with dedicated public communications responsibilities can be an invaluable resource for agencies as they seek to better achieve their mission through public communications.

communications staff succeed in their mission to better serve their communities.

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## TECHNICAL APPENDIX

This appendix presents additional details on the workshop and our process to identify and prioritize research and technology needs and turn them into the research agenda presented in the main report. The descriptions here are drawn and adapted from previous PCJNI publications and reflect the adjustments to the needs identification and prioritization process implemented at this workshop.

### Workshop Scope and Panel Selection

The topics for PCJNI workshops are selected by reaching a consensus between the action officers and subject matter experts at NIJ and research staff at the organizations that will be facilitating the workshop. Multiple topic areas accompanied by brief scoping descriptions are typically suggested months before the workshop by one or more of the parties involved, and staff engage in group deliberations with NIJ to reach consensus on the topic. We then engage in further scoping of the workshop to craft a discussion agenda through literature review and/or informal discussions with other practitioners and subject matter experts. Once topic and scope have been determined, we recruit panel members first by iden-

tifying knowledgeable individuals through existing professional and social networks (e.g., LinkedIn) and by reviewing literature published on the topic. We then extend an invitation to those individuals and provide a brief description of the workshop's focus areas.

The goal of the process of expert elicitation described here was to gather unbiased, representative results from experts and practitioners in the field. However, we note some limitations that could affect the findings. The process described here typically elicits opinions from a relatively small group of experts. To limit the effect of group size on the representativeness of the results, we strove to make the group as representative as possible of different disciplines, perspectives, and geographic regions. However, the final output of the workshop is likely to be significantly influenced by the specific group of experts invited to participate. It is possible that the workshop's findings could be different if a different group of experts were selected. Moreover, although the discussion moderators make every effort to act as neutral parties eliciting opinions from the collected experts, the background and experience of the moderators has the potential to influence which questions they pose to the group and how they phrase those questions. This could also introduce bias that could influence the findings.

### Identification and Prioritization of Needs

To develop and prioritize a list of technology and policy issues that are likely to benefit from research and investment, we followed a process similar to processes we used in previous PCJNI workshops (see, for example, Jackson, Russo, et al., 2015; Jackson, Banks, et al., 2016, and references therein). Participants discussed and refined problems and identified potential solutions (or *needs*) that could address each problem. In addition, needs could be framed in response to opportunities to improve performance by adopting or adapting a new approach or practice (e.g., applying a new technology or tool in the sector that had not been used before). After identifying and refining the needs, we used a voting process based on the Delphi method to elicit prioritization information from the group about the identified needs.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, PCJNI workshops were conducted in person in a group setting. However, under the restrictions and mitigations for the COVID-19 pandemic response, our participants and staff were unable to travel. Our typical in-person format involved a two-day, 14-hour in-person meeting (eight hours the first day, six hours the second day). However, drawing on several organizations' and individu-

als' experience in running and participating in virtual high-intensity events, we determined that it would not be advisable to try to directly replicate this meeting format using virtual conferencing tools. Instead, we prepared a multistage process:

- interviewing each participant individually or in small groups for approximately one hour to build an initial picture of their views and ideas
- conducting a set of shorter, more-focused virtual sessions to provide the group with the opportunity to react to and shape the consolidated picture that came from our synthesis of the individual interview input
- including a final voting stage after the last interactive session where participants provided their final assessment of the rankings of the different needs.

### Interviews

During the interviews, we asked practitioner panelists to discuss the challenges that they or their colleagues have personally experienced. For those panelists who were not practitioners (e.g., academics, civil liberties advocates), we asked them to speak from their experience working with practitioners. We also asked them to identify areas where additional research and development investments could help alleviate the challenges. During these discussions, participants suggested additional areas that were potentially worthy of research or investment. We consolidated and integrated the problems, opportunities, and potential solutions described by the participants in the separate interviews into a single summarized list. In advance of the first meeting of the virtual workshop, panelists were provided with the summarized list of issues and needs.

### Virtual Sessions

Once each participant had been interviewed and the needs were consolidated, we held three two-hour virtual meetings using the Zoom virtual meeting platform. These meetings were configured such that the participants could see one another's video feed and individually collaborate to refine and edit the consolidated needs that were shared from a moderator's desktop.

At the end of the discussion of each group of needs, participants were given an opportunity to review and revise the list of problems, opportunities, and potential solutions that they had previously identified. The panelists' combined lists for each topic were displayed one by one on the screenshare portion of

Zoom using Microsoft PowerPoint slides that were edited in real time to incorporate participant revisions and comments.

Once the group reached consensus on a group of needs, we conducted a real-time voting prioritization exercise using Delphi techniques. We asked the panel to anonymously vote using a web-based polling system (specifically, the PollAnywhere feature from Turning Technologies).

Each participant was asked to individually score each need and associated strategies to address those needs using a 1 to 9 scale for two dimensions: importance and probability of success.

For the *importance* dimension, participants were instructed that 1 was a low score and 9 was a high score. Participants were further told to score a need's importance with a 1 if it would have little or no impact on the problem and with a 9 if it would reduce the impact of the problem by 20 percent or more. Anchoring the scale with percentage improvements in the need's performance is intended to help make rating values more comparable from participant to participant.

For the *probability of success* dimension, participants were instructed to treat the 1 to 9 scale as a percentage chance that the need could be met and broadly implemented successfully. That is, they could assign the need's chance of success between 10 percent (rating of 1) and 90 percent (rating of 9). This dimension was intended to include not just technical concerns (whether the need would be hard to meet) but also the effects of factors that might cause practitioners to not adopt the new technology, policy, or practice even if it was developed; such factors could include, for example, cost, effect on practitioner workloads, other staffing concerns, and societal concerns.

After the participants provided their individual ratings using the web-based polling system (i.e., for *importance* or *probability of success*), we displayed a histogram-style summary of participant responses within the polling system's interface. If there was significant disagreement among the panel (the degree of disagreement was determined by our visual inspection of the histogram), then the participants were asked to verbally discuss or explain their votes at one end of the spectrum or the other. If a second round of discussion occurred, participants were given an opportunity to adjust their rating on the same question. This process was repeated for each question and dimension at the end of each topic area.

### Postsession Prioritization

Once participants completed this rating process for all topic areas, we put the needs into a single, prioritized list. We ordered

the list by calculating an expected value using the method outlined in Jackson, Banks, et al., 2016. For each need, we multiplied the final (second-round) ratings for importance and probability of success to produce an expected value. We then calculated the median of that product across all of the respondents and used that as the group's collective expected value score for the need.

We then clustered the resulting expected value scores into three tiers using a hierarchical clustering algorithm. The algorithm we used was the "ward.D" spherical algorithm from the "stats" library in the R statistical package, version 4.0.2. We chose this algorithm to minimize within-cluster variance when determining the breaks between tiers. The choice of three tiers is arbitrary but was done, in part, to remain consistent across the set of technology workshops we have conducted for NIJ. Also, the choice of three tiers represents a manageable system for policymakers. Specifically, the top-tier needs are the priorities that should be the primary policymaking focus, the second-tier needs should be examined closely, and the third-tier needs are probably not worth much attention in the short term (unless, for example, they can be addressed with existing technology or approaches that can be readily and cheaply adapted to the identified need).

Because the participants initially rated the needs one topic area at a time, we gave them an opportunity at the end of the workshop to review and weigh in on the entire tiered list of all identified needs. The intention of this step was to let panel members see the needs in the context of the other tiered needs and allow them to consider whether there were needs that appeared too high or low relative to the others. To collect these assessments, we emailed the entire tiered list in a Microsoft Word document to the participants. This step allowed the participants to see all of the ranked needs collected across all sessions, providing a top-level view complementary to the rankings provided session by session. Participants were then asked to examine where each of the needs landed on the overall tiered list and whether this ordering was appropriate or needed fine-tuning. Participants had the option to indicate whether each problem and need pairing should be voted up or down on the list. A stylized mockup of this form is provided in Table A.1.

We then tallied the participants' responses and applied those votes to produce a final list of prioritized, tiered needs. To adjust the expected values using the up and down votes from the third round of prioritization, we implemented a method equivalent to the one we used in previous work (Hollywood et al., 2016). Specifically, if every panel member voted "up"

**Table A.1. Mockup of the Delphi Third-Round Voting Form**

Question	Tier	Vote Up	Vote Down
<b>Tier 1</b>			
<p><b>Issue:</b> Many departments are still not prepared to effectively communicate with the public, and agencies or PIOs might not recognize when they need help in their communications strategies.</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Disseminate a guide for regularly gauging community sentiment and priorities, including a list of different tools that could be used (surveys, social media, apps, audits, etc.), estimates of the resource investments that they require, descriptions of their benefits and limitations, and potential alternative funding sources for them (e.g., grants, philanthropy).</p>	1		
<p><b>Issue:</b> PIOs often lack resources that they can turn to for quick-turn advice and guidance in incident response or crises. Agencies often do not have or know where to find resources on effective public communications strategies (especially smaller agencies that may not have a dedicated PIO role).</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Build professional networks and information-sharing for PIOs through networking and information-sharing events, such as association memberships, conferences, Zoom meetings, or webinars. These could be promoted or disseminated through existing regional, state, and national organizations and associations.</p>	1		
<b>Tier 2</b>			
<p><b>Issue:</b> Many agencies do not have consistent, comprehensive communications strategies that coordinate messaging across multiple channels to reach intended audiences (beyond just social media).</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Document case studies focused on specific platforms and how law enforcement agencies and PIOs have been able to effectively engage using them (e.g., use of NextDoor, use of Facebook Live, rapid engagements with local news).</p>	2		
<p><b>Issue:</b> Many agencies simply are not consistently communicating with their communities at all. Without proactively establishing those relationships, problems are not seen and potential responses are limited when crises happen. There has been a paradigm shift, and agencies need to adapt.</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Create multifaceted template communications plans that can be adapted to agencies of varying sizes and types. The communications plans need to show how the agency will sustain communications strategies over time, gather community input, and build relationships.</p>	2		
<b>Tier 3</b>			
<p><b>Issue:</b> PIOs may not know the most-effective strategies, platforms, and messages needed to disseminate information to target populations (i.e., what demographics are using different media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and news broadcasts; how they are using those platforms; and what messages can reach them).</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Disseminate regularly updated guidance, drawing on existing research and documentation, on effective information dissemination strategies for different demographics or target populations. Pay special attention to the utility of different social media platforms. Include accessibility strategies for such things as language translations and disabilities and research on useful performance metrics, goals, and ways to measure the effectiveness of engagement strategies. There is a need to address security concerns in some applications.</p>	3		
<p><b>Issue:</b> Other organizations (e.g., nonprofits, libraries) have learned how to use social media very effectively to engage their target audiences and deliver their messaging. They may offer useful lessons learned for law enforcement PIOs.</p> <p><b>Need:</b> Document best practices and lessons learned from examination of effective social media strategies used in other sectors.</p>	3		

NOTE: Shaded cells indicate that up or down votes were not possible (e.g., Tier 1 is the top tier, so it was impossible to upvote items in that tier).

for a need that was at the bottom of the list, then the collective effect of those votes should be to move the need to the top. (The opposite would happen if every panelist voted “down” for a need that was at the top of the list.) To determine the point value of a single vote, we divided the full range of expected values by the number of participants voting.

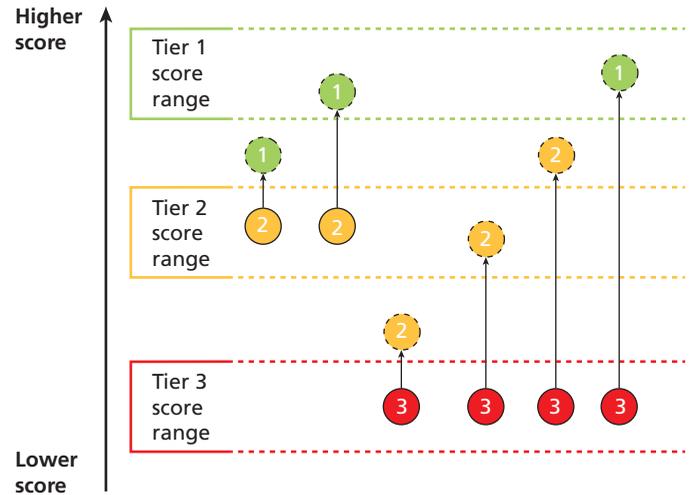
To prevent the (somewhat rare) situation in which small numbers of votes have an unintended outsized impact—for example, when some or all of the needs in one tier have the same or very similar expected values—we also set a threshold that at least 25 percent of the workshop participants must have voted on that need (and then rounded to the nearest full par-

ticipant). For this workshop, there were 11 voting participants (three participants either only participated in interviews or left early), so, for any votes to have an effect on changing a need's tier, at least two participants would have had to have voted to move the need up or down.

After applying the up and down vote points to the second-round expected values, we compared the modified scores with the boundary values for the tiers to see whether the change was enough to move any needs up or down in the prioritization. (Note that there were gaps between these boundaries, so some of the modified expected values could fall in between tiers. See Figure A.1.) As with prior work, we set a higher bar for a need to move up or down two tiers (from Tier 1 to Tier 3, or vice versa) than for a need to move to the tier immediately above or below. Specifically, a need could *increase by one tier* if its modified expected value was higher than the highest expected value score in its initial tier. And a need could *decrease by one tier* if its modified expected value was lower than the lowest expected value in its initial tier. However, *to increase or decrease by two tiers* (possible only for needs that started in Tier 1 or Tier 3), the score had to increase or decrease by an amount that fully placed the need into the range two tiers away. For example, for a Tier 3 need to jump to Tier 1, its expected value score had to fall within the boundaries of Tier 1, not just within the gap between Tier 1 and Tier 2. Figure A.1 illustrates the greater score change required for a need to move two tiers (one need on the far right of the figure) compared with one tier (all other examples shown).

Applying these decision rules to integrate the participants' third-round inputs into the final tiering of needs resulted in numerical separations between tiers that were less clear than the separations that resulted when we used the clustering algorithm in the initial tiering. This can occur because, for example, when the final expected value score for a need that was originally

**Figure A.1. Illustration of How a Need's Increase in Expected Value Might Result in Its Movement Across Tier Boundaries**



NOTE: Each example need's original tier is shown by a circle with a solid border (the two needs starting in Tier 2 and the four needs starting in Tier 3). Each need's new tier after the third-round score adjustment is shown by the connected circle with a dotted border.

in Tier 3 falls just below the boundary value for Tier 1, that need's final score could be higher than that of some other needs in the item's new tier (Tier 2). See Figure A.2, which shows the distribution of the needs by expected value score after the second-round rating process and then after the third-round voting process.

As a result of the third round of voting, 22 needs did not change position, three needs rose one tier, and one need dropped down one tier (no needs changed two tiers). The output from this process became the final ranking of the panel's prioritized results. Table A.2 shows the complete list of needs by tier.

Figure A.2. Final Distribution of the Tiered Needs

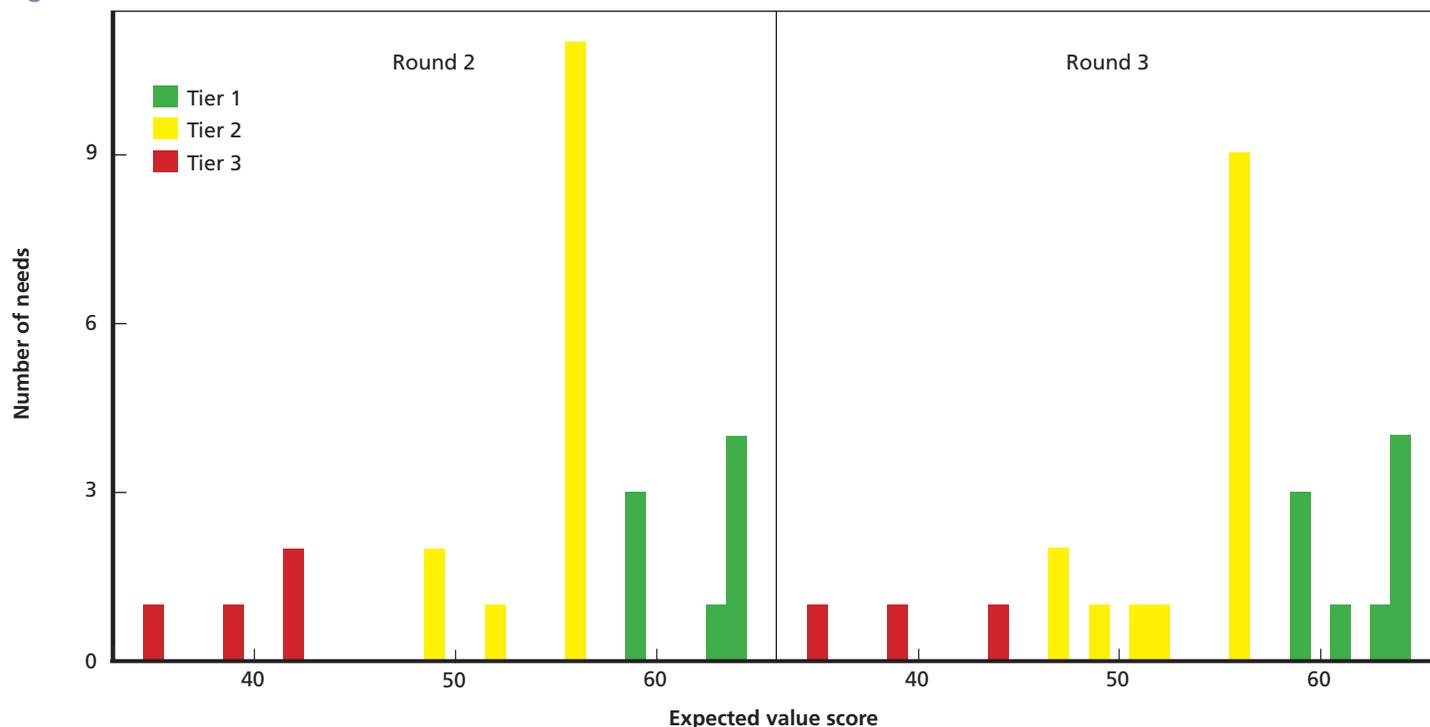


Table A.2. Complete List of Needs, by Tier

Problem or Opportunity <sup>a</sup>	Potential Solution	Tier
<p>Strategy and best practice</p> <p>Protests and civil unrest create a distinct and enduring challenge for police PIOs. These events carry the risk of adversarial interactions that can damage trust in law enforcement. They also can serve as opportunities to demonstrate that an agency is willing to listen to the community’s concerns and invite community leaders to provide input.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have national organizations create regionally focused case studies identifying potential pitfalls and effective strategies for public communications specifically related to protests, civil unrest, and other challenging events. Include recommendations on                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>merging communications plans with tactical plans</li> <li>communicating clear goals for police response with priority on ensuring the right of members of the public to safely express their views</li> <li>performing targeted outreach and response to hear and meet needs of different community stakeholders</li> <li>creating unified messaging and a unified strategy with other offices and/or agencies that demonstrate a consistent, professional response.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	1
<p>Many departments are still not prepared to effectively communicate with the public, and agencies or PIOs might not recognize when they need help in their communications strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate a guide for regularly gauging community sentiment and priorities, including a list of different tools that could be used (surveys, social media, apps, audits, etc.), estimates of the resource investments that they require, descriptions of their benefits and limitations, and potential alternative funding sources for them (e.g., grants, philanthropy).</li> </ul>	1
<p>Agencies are often not communicating quickly enough with the public during critical incidents. Agencies often need to transition from thinking of communication as “pleasing the media and meeting their deadlines” to “what does the public need to hear and when?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create guidance for rapid response strategies for leadership and public communications staff that establish consistent, clear time-lines for information release (e.g., critical incident checklist, crisis communications plans, better use of social media, and creation of policies that facilitate rapid release of information). Include guidelines for updating information over time.</li> </ul>	1

Table A.2—Continued

Problem or Opportunity <sup>a</sup>	Potential Solution	Tier
<b>Organizational issues</b>		
<p>Many agency leaders still do not understand the full value and potential of an effective PIO. They do not understand how investing in the role can improve multiple outcomes for the agency beyond public perception (e.g., informing policing strategy, improving recruiting, building relationships with elected officials, achieving officer buy-in on leadership decisions). It can be challenging to achieve leadership buy-in to the idea that a dedicated PIO or more communication training for officers would be worth the resources required, especially for smaller agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In best practices and training for executives and PIOs, address the benefits of an increased role for a PIO in delivering internal messaging, in addition to conducting externally facing responsibilities. A PIO can contribute to greater internal transparency on decision-making and communication of community sentiment, leading to better buy-in from line staff on engagement strategy and improved morale.</li> </ul>	1
<p>When staffing the office, agencies may not understand what expertise and qualities make for a good PIO, especially with respect to differences between large and small agencies and benefits, trade-offs, and return on investment of using sworn versus civilian staff in the role (e.g., agencies will often assign officers to the role as a short-term learning opportunity rather than staffing a dedicated professional who can build long-term relationships).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In published guidance and training for executives, incorporate guidance on characteristics of effective PIOs, appropriate PIO roles and responsibilities (especially in small or mid-sized agencies), and benefits and trade-offs when hiring sworn or civilian PIOs (e.g., with respect to the PIO's ability to build and maintain relationships; retention and consistency in the position; skills and experience in such things as incident response or on-camera work; and integration in the department culture).</li> </ul>	
<b>Sharing information and building trust</b>		
<p>PIO offices are often reactive rather than proactive in communicating how departments are addressing ongoing, predictable, or long-standing issues of concern to their communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create guidance for PIOs on how to invest time and resources to identify, evaluate, and respond to recent and long-standing community concerns (e.g., monitoring trends on social media) and on appropriate local responses to incidents that may affect policing nationwide. PIOs need to examine and state how agencies will address local issues before a crisis occurs. Reach out to neighboring agencies who have addressed certain issues well.</li> </ul>	1
<p>Agencies often adopt a reflexively defensive attitude toward public criticism that focuses on how events affect the agency, often coupled with a distrust toward the media. This can prevent them from fostering the relationships that could help them hear community concerns, craft effective messaging on agency responses, and demonstrate a department and officers that share community values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create communications plans that provide tactics that a PIO can authentically adapt to local sensitivities to give constructive responses to known criticisms. Include guidance on how certain responses may address the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including those in the agency.</li> </ul>	
<b>Public communications staff development</b>		
<p>PIOs often lack resources that they can turn to for quick-turn advice and guidance in incident response or crises. Agencies often do not have or know where to find resources on effective public communications strategies (especially smaller agencies that may not have a dedicated PIO role).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build professional networks and information-sharing for PIOs through networking and information-sharing events, such as association memberships, conferences, Zoom meetings, or webinars. These could be promoted or disseminated through existing regional, state, and national organizations and associations.</li> </ul>	1
<p>Many agencies do not have consistent, comprehensive communications strategies that coordinate messaging across multiple channels to reach intended audiences (beyond just social media).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create low-cost training or partnership opportunities (e.g., shadowing similar agency PIOs) for law enforcement PIOs on building comprehensive, consistent communications strategies spanning multiple platforms, engagement types, and types of media.</li> </ul>	

Table A.2—Continued

Problem or Opportunity <sup>a</sup>	Potential Solution	Tier
Strategy and best practice		
<p>Protests and civil unrest create a distinct and enduring challenge for police PIOs. These events carry the risk of adversarial interactions that can damage trust in law enforcement. They also can serve as opportunities to demonstrate that an agency is willing to listen to the community's concerns and invite community leaders to provide input.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make surge capacity available for agencies to handle multiple aspects of communications (e.g., social media, community liaison, press briefs) during challenging events. National policing organizations must elevate the importance of general and crisis communications training at all levels. In-service training on communications needs to be elevated to comparable importance as other training given to officers in the street.</li> </ul>	2
<p>Many agencies do not have consistent, comprehensive communications strategies that coordinate messaging across multiple channels to reach intended audiences (beyond just social media).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document case studies focused on specific platforms and how law enforcement agencies and PIOs have been able to effectively engage using them (e.g., use of NextDoor, use of Facebook Live, rapid engagements with local news).</li> </ul>	
<p>Many departments are still not prepared to effectively communicate with the public, and agencies or PIOs might not even recognize when they need help in their communications strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform case studies of PIO offices in a diverse set of agency types and sizes that detail best practices, pitfalls to avoid, and general guidance on how to build and maintain effective public communications offices and roles in police departments.</li> </ul>	
Organizational issues		
<p>Many departments have a challenge integrating public information offices with existing department culture. There is often an existing culture where officers distrust or stay away from those in public communications roles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create training at the regional and state levels that incorporates both chiefs and PIOs to reinforce the importance of integrating a communications culture in the agency. Include guidance for integrating agency culture with the PIO mission (e.g., include PIOs at command staff meetings, literally and figuratively place the PIO office close to command staff, provide guidance for building rapport between sworn and nonsworn staff, and include aspects of public communications in officer training).</li> </ul>	2
<p>Many agency leaders still do not understand the full value and potential of an effective PIO. They do not understand how investing in the role can improve multiple outcomes for the agency beyond public perception (e.g., informing policing strategy, improving recruiting, building relationships with elected officials, achieving officer buy-in on leadership decisions). It can be challenging to achieve leadership buy-in to the idea that a dedicated PIO or more communication training for officers would be worth the resources required, especially for smaller agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect and disseminate (e.g., through summits, webinars, conferences) lessons learned from newsworthy law enforcement events or ongoing communications philosophies that led to positive or negative outcomes. Describe how the right actions improved outcomes or the wrong actions contributed to negative outcomes that could have been avoided.</li> <li>• Encourage research from national journalism, justice policy, and community-based organizations to provide an evidence base describing the value of the role for a department. This research would identify useful metrics for determining return on investment of the PIO role and evaluate the impact of public communications offices and PIO roles in departments.</li> </ul>	
<p>PIOs have been suffering from burnout and declining morale and mental health. This has a variety of causes, including job insecurity from resource shortfalls, isolation from the rest of the agency, social media negativity, and declining public trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform research specifically focused on health and wellness of PIOs and staff with public communications responsibilities to quantify the problem, identify causes, and find potential solutions.</li> </ul>	

Table A.2—Continued

Problem or Opportunity <sup>a</sup>	Potential Solution	Tier
<b>Sharing information and building trust</b>		
<p>Many agencies simply are not consistently communicating with their communities at all. Without proactively establishing those relationships, problems are not seen and potential responses are limited when crises happen. There has been a paradigm shift, and agencies need to adapt.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create multifaceted template communications plans that can be adapted to agencies of varying sizes and types. The communications plans need to show how the agency will sustain communications strategies over time, gather community input, and build relationships.</li> </ul>	2
<p>Law enforcement PIOs have access to a wealth of data on agency processes, activities, and outcomes, but these data are often not shared strategically (in context), regularly, and transparently with communities. The data consist of statistics on arrests, case resolution rates, hiring practices, internal policy changes in response to incidents, performance evaluation criteria, disciplinary actions, and much more. This represents a lost opportunity for PIOs to build trust with communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform research to inform guidance for agencies on structuring offices to give PIOs direct access to agency leadership. Examine PIOs' level of confidence to succeed in sharing information, especially with respect to their rank and access to leadership. Chiefs need to grant trust and authority to their PIOs to speak on behalf of their agencies.</li> <li>• Create guidance for PIOs that describes internal guidance on data organization (e.g., a data organization chart), valuable types of information to analyze and share, and best practices for tracking and reporting it (e.g., responding to Freedom of Information Act requests). Focus this guidance on helping the PIOs use information-sharing practices to demonstrate agency commitment and responsiveness to community values.</li> </ul>	
<p>Departments often do not have clear or consistent guidelines and tools to track and report certain statistics (e.g., rape statistics, misconduct). Existing software systems are often not built to adequately track and share all the information that PIOs may want to share. Available tools for the public to visualize and understand the data are often hard to use, and this can make it challenging for agencies to demonstrate a commitment to transparently communicate in a way that builds trust with communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use case studies of agencies that have shared data well and lessons learned from the public sector on how to effectively track information, create databases, and create useful visualizations. The intent would be to use these to create a publicly available template and instructions for creating useful databases of police data and user-friendly dashboards for visualizing police data that would be inexpensive for an agency of any size to adapt.</li> </ul>	
<b>Public communications staff development</b>		
<p>PIOs often lack resources that they can turn to for quick-turn advice and guidance in incident response or crises. Agencies often do not have or know where to find resources on effective public communications strategies (especially smaller agencies that may not have a dedicated PIO role).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have professional associations (e.g., the National Information Officers Association) create a licensing or accreditation program for PIOs that would standardize training, improve professional networks, and improve guidance dissemination for the PIO profession.</li> </ul>	2

**Table A.2—Continued**

Problem or Opportunity <sup>a</sup>	Potential Solution	Tier
<p>Many agencies do not have consistent, comprehensive communications strategies that coordinate messaging across multiple channels to reach intended audiences (beyond just social media).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Note that many other local and regional entities (e.g., city or county PIOs or other city or state agencies) have PIOs or public affairs offices that can be helpful partners for support and the creation of coordinated messaging approaches. Create regional training opportunities that provide recommendations and guidance for law enforcement PIOs to also form partnerships with non-law-enforcement PIOs and offices with similar roles to coordinate messaging.</li> <li>Disseminate a guide for regularly gauging community sentiment and priorities, including a list of different tools that could be used (surveys, social media, apps, audits, etc.), estimates of the resource investments that they require, descriptions of their benefits and limitations, and potential alternative funding sources for them (e.g., grants, philanthropy).</li> </ul>	
<b>Strategy and best practice</b>		
<p>PIOs may not know the most-effective strategies, platforms, and messages needed to disseminate information to target populations (i.e., what demographics are using different media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and news broadcasts; how they are using those platforms; and what messages can reach them).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate regularly updated guidance, drawing on existing research and documentation, on effective information dissemination strategies for different demographics or target populations. Pay special attention to the utility of different social media platforms. Include accessibility strategies for such things as language translations and disabilities and research on useful performance metrics, goals, and ways to measure the effectiveness of engagement strategies. There is a need to address security concerns in some applications.</li> </ul>	3
<p>Other organizations (e.g., nonprofits, libraries) have learned how to use social media very effectively to engage their target audiences and deliver their messaging. They may offer useful lessons learned for law enforcement PIOs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document best practices and lessons learned from examination of effective social media strategies used in other sectors.</li> </ul>	
<b>Organizational issues</b>		
<p>Being able to quickly document and track the daily person-to-person interactions that officers have in the community (e.g., conversations with community members) would provide an agency with many opportunities to analyze and improve decision-making, reinforce and demonstrate success stories, and understand community priorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify tools to incorporate the documentation of community engagement and person-to-person interactions in existing information systems (e.g., a tag or code in a computer-aided dispatch system). Create guidance for policy on incorporating documentation of community interactions in agency practice (including achieving officer buy-in) and integrating community interaction data into a proactive communications strategy.</li> </ul>	3

<sup>a</sup> A *need* is the combination of a problem or opportunity and a potential solution. Several of the problems or opportunities are repeated throughout the table because they are combined with a variety of potential solutions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Procedural justice* refers to an individual's perception of treatment in a decisionmaking process, especially with respect to fairness and the individual's agency and dignity in the process. Mazerolle et al., 2013, describes four essential components of procedural justice: (1) citizen participation in proceedings prior to an authority's decision, (2) perceived neutrality of the authority, (3) whether the authority showed the citizen dignity and respect, and (4) whether the authority conveyed trustworthy motives.

<sup>2</sup> The PIO could conceivably have important impacts on how an agency manages each pillar: (1) building trust and legitimacy, (2) policy and oversight, (3) technology and social media, (4) community policing and crime reduction, (5) training and education, and (6) officer wellness and safety.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Department of Justice Police Critical Incident Checklist generally defines a *critical incident* in the context of policing as an event "that has the potential to result in controversy or conflict involving the police and a community" (U.S. Department of Justice, undated). This definition could potentially cover a wide variety of scenarios, including civil unrest, mass casualty events, and officer-involved shootings.

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## Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email [justicepolicy@rand.org](mailto:justicepolicy@rand.org).

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## About This Report

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the RAND Corporation, in partnership with the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), RTI International, and the University of Denver, is carrying out a research effort to assess and prioritize technology and related needs across the criminal justice community. This research effort, called the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative (PCJNI), is a component of the Criminal Justice Requirements and Resources Consortium (RRC) and is intended to support innovation within the criminal justice enterprise. For more information about the RRC and the PCJNI, please see <https://www.rand.org/well-being/justice-policy/projects/priority-criminal-justice-needs.html>.

This report is one product of that effort. In April 2021, RAND conducted an expert workshop on law enforcement public information officers (PIOs). This report describes the proceedings of that workshop, the topics considered, the needs that the panel developed, and the overarching themes that emerged from the panel's discussions. It should be of interest to law enforcement practitioners with public communications responsibilities, law enforcement executives, civil liberties and police transparency advocates, and law enforcement researchers.

Other RAND research reports from the PCJNI that might be of interest include the following:

- Brian A. Jackson, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, Duren Banks, Sean E. Goodison, Joe Russo, Jeremy D. Barnum, Camille Gourdet, Lynn Langton, Michael G. Planty, Shoshana R. Shelton, Siara I. Sitar, and Amanda R. Witwer, *Promising Practices from Law Enforcement's COVID-19 Response: Protecting the Public*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RB-A108-1, 2021.
- Sean E. Goodison, Jeremy D. Barnum, Michael J. D. Vermeer, Dulani Woods, Siara I. Sitar, and Brian A. Jackson, *The Law Enforcement Response to Homelessness: Identifying High-Priority Needs to Improve Law Enforcement Strategies for Addressing Homelessness*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A108-6, 2020.
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