

City of Suisun City Police Department

2007-2008 Solano County Grand Jury

Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury received a complaint about policies and procedures within the City of Suisun City Police Department. Pursuant to Penal Code Section 925a, the Grand Jury decided to investigate and report on the operations, accounts and records of the Suisun City Police Department.

Grand Jury Actions

- Interviewed the complainant
- Interviewed City Manager, Suisun City
- Interviewed Assistant City Manager, Suisun City
- Interviewed Police Chief and Commander, Suisun City
- Interviewed Police Sergeants, Officers, and Dispatch Personnel, Suisun City
- Interviewed Solano County Fleet Manager
- Reviewed information provided by Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission
- Reviewed Suisun City Police Department General Orders, Memorandum of Understanding, and other documents
- Reviewed “Suisun City News” at www.suisun.com
- Reviewed “Suisun City Discovery” publication distributed in March 2008

Background/Summary

The City of Suisun City Police Department (the Department) headquarters are located at 701 Civic Center Boulevard, Suisun City, CA. A substation is located at 1101 Charleston Street, in the Peterson Ranch area of the City. The Department is small. It operates on a \$4.1 million dollar annual budget and provides police services for approximately 28,000 residents.

In recent years, the Department has been undergoing a process of change. During the period 2003-2006, due to a mix of retirements, officers leaving for other jobs, and citywide budget problems, the Department was unable to provide full-time services for the City. As a cost saving measure during that time, Suisun City (the City) contracted with the Solano County Sheriff’s Department to provide early morning patrols. A former mayor had suggested that the City seriously examine the possibility of contracting out its police services full time. By 2006, however, the City’s budget improved, new police officers were hired, and the Department was able to resume 24-hour policing again. In early 2007, a new police chief, formerly a sergeant in the Los Angeles Police Department, took office.

The Department is currently authorized 26 sworn personnel and is budgeted for 24. In October 2007, the Department had a total of 22 sworn personnel, including the Chief. At the time of this report, the total number of sworn personnel, including the Chief, was 20. The Department does not use reserve officers. All sergeants and officers work 12-hour shifts.

In July 2007, the Department leased and received a mobile modular unit for use as office space for the detectives. The modular unit is 12' x 42' and costs the Department \$332 per month. However, the Department made no immediate provision for the connection of utilities to the unit. Electricity was finally connected in March 2008. At the time of our investigation, phone and computer lines had not yet been installed. Furniture and computers would then have to be moved from the Investigators Office into the unit. The unit has not yet been used.

Command Structure

At the time of our investigation, the Department appeared to have an ineffective command structure. The Chief heads the Department. Immediately under the Chief is a Commander, with responsibilities for day-to-day operations. Until very recently, this Commander was an unsworn interim employee working on a part-time basis. His hours did not overlap those of many of the operational personnel. The Department recently advertised for an individual to fill the commander position on a full time basis. According to a recent news report, a full time Commander will take office in mid-May 2008.

There are no lieutenants in the Department to perform middle-management duties. Instead, there are four Sergeants in the Department. Based on our investigation, it appears that one Sergeant who, in addition to supervising a patrol shift and performing operational duties, has a disproportionate share of other responsibilities. For example, he is responsible for major criminal investigations, supervising detectives, supervising maintenance, overseeing the use of police vehicles and field equipment, overseeing the K-9 unit, performing incident commander duties at major incidents, being responsible for traffic enforcement and controlling the processing and disposition of evidence. In addition, he is responsible for coordinating compliance with departmental orders concerning shooting range qualifications, certifications, and other operational duties. As the training supervisor, he assigns several officers, pursuant to their expertise, to carry out various phases of field training.

Training Requirements

The training required of California peace officers comes from two primary sources: (1) statutes, and (2) minimum standards adopted by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), a commission within the California Department of Justice. Since 1959, POST has been responsible for raising the competence level of law enforcement officers in California, by establishing minimum selection and training standards, improving management practices and providing financial assistance to local agencies relating to the training of law enforcement officers.

Before any person may exercise the powers of a peace officer in California, statutes require that the person must first satisfactorily complete an introductory course of training. (Pen. Code §832.) Thereafter, all California peace officers must complete POST-approved field training programs within their departments. (See Pen. Code §§13500, 13503, 13512.)

The Suisun City Police Department receives POST reimbursement for training expenses. In fiscal year 2006-2007, the Department received over \$18,000.

During this investigation, the Grand Jury learned that it is up to the Chief to decide which POST-certified courses best meet the needs of the Department. It is the stated policy of the Department "to administer a training program that will provide for the professional growth and continued development

of its personnel. By doing so, the Department will ensure its personnel possess the knowledge and skills necessary to provide a professional level of service that meets the needs of the community.”

POST requires a 24-hour Continued Professional Training requirement every two years for all peace officers. This requirement includes 14 hours of Perishable Skills Training, which includes driver training, tactical firearms, arrest and control and communications, both tactical and interpersonal.

During our investigation, several officers testified that more overall continuation training was desired, particularly in the areas of target practice, shooting, arrest and control and operating patrol vehicle equipment, including cameras. Although the Grand Jury did not physically inspect the department’s training records, we felt that it was unnecessary due to the extent of the testimony provided by witnesses.

Peace officers must be trained in first aid and CPR every three years. Some witnesses testified that first aid training is not current.

It is unclear if all detectives have completed the investigators’ basic course required by POST regulations. It is also unclear if all officers have had required refresher courses in domestic violence, racial profiling, racial-cultural refresher training and sexual harassment in the work place. POST funds are available to assist the Department in augmenting its training.

The Department’s training policy, which is included in the Department’s General Orders last revised in February 2008, provides for “an annual training-needs assessment of the Department. The needs assessment will be reviewed by staff. Upon approval by the staff, the needs assessment will form the basis for the training plan for the fiscal year.”

To its credit, the Department in the recent past has organized some multi-departmental training sessions for the benefit of not only its own officers, but those of other law enforcement agencies in the County. For example, a four-day training session was held, involving both classroom and tactical exercises, focusing on entering buildings and handling “active shooters.” The tactics learned could be used in the event of a campus shooting incident or a hostage or other situation where there might be a need for an immediate police reaction.

Assigned Vehicles

The Department owns two fully-equipped motorcycles that are used occasionally. According to the Department website, it also owns two boats and two personal watercraft.

The Department leases 22 vehicles from Solano County. Eleven are marked patrol vehicles, six are unmarked sedans, and five are various sized pick-up trucks. The lease is administered and monitored by the Solano County Department of General Services, Fleet Management Division. The current vehicle lease agreement expires June 30, 2008. The monthly cost to the City is over \$16,000 for the entire leased fleet. The mileage rate charged varies from 15 cents to 55 cents, dependent upon the vehicle type and the included equipment. Pursuant to the lease agreement, vehicles are taken out of service and replaced based on time in service. It is the intent of the County to charge all entities for collision repairs, beginning July 1, 2008.

Several individuals have unmarked vehicles assigned to them. In some instances, assigned vehicles were authorized to be driven home at the end of a shift or at the end of a workweek. During our investigation, it was learned that in one case, the distance traveled was over 170 miles one way. This fact may not have been fully transparent to Department and City management. Since February 2008, the Department's Vehicle Use Policy was changed to read: "The Chief of Police will grant approval of a specific employee or team of employees to regularly home garage a Department vehicle only when they are subject to a high frequency of emergency call-outs or inspections."

Each sworn officer and the Commander have a "fuel-man" credit card issued to them. The fuel-man cards are used to purchase gasoline for a vehicle when necessary. Gasoline purchases are made at two different gas stations within the City. It is unclear how often monitoring occurs and there appears to be no accounting control practices in place to insure they are properly used. There also seems to be no requirement to provide receipts that include mileage, signature of the purchaser and submission to the Department's Fleet Manager for verification.

Traffic Accidents

Officer safety is a very important part of the overall operations of the Department. It is the policy of the Department to investigate and report on vehicle collisions involving death, injury or property damage. The California Highway Patrol may assist when a traffic collision involves a city official or employee and serious injury, or if a fatality occurs.

The Grand Jury reviewed documents from the Department and County agencies relating to traffic accidents involving police vehicles. The Department indicated that approximately five officer-related traffic accidents occurred in 2007. In four of those, an officer was determined to be at fault. The Grand Jury's examination of County records indicates that 10 officer-related traffic accidents may have occurred in 2007.

Low Morale

Most witnesses testified that morale within the Department was low. Some of this may be inherent in any organization undergoing rapid change. One specific reason given for low employee morale was the lack of effective communications, which includes the making of changes with little or no explanation of reasons for the change, and the failure to follow through on promises made. For example, two sergeants were recently recruited and employed from outside the Department. Many of those that testified stated that keeping promises to promote from within would go a long way to restoring morale. Other reasons given for low employee morale were insufficient staffing, lack of adequate training and a low wage structure.

Staffing has been a long-standing problem for the Department. Budget constraints and the inability of city government to offer an attractive starting salary seem to be a core issue. The opportunity exists for this to change in the near future.

According to a February 12, 2008 press release provided by the City, Suisun City experiences a loss of 70 percent of potential sales tax revenue to neighboring communities. The City captures about \$2,875 per capita in annual taxable sales compared to \$12,693 per capita for Fairfield, \$9,892 per capita average across all Solano County jurisdictions and \$10,068 average for all California cities.

In recent months, the City Council has approved a new large discount superstore, gas station, and a sit-down restaurant at the intersection of Highway 12 and Walters Road. The net fiscal impact of this project is estimated to be approximately \$965,000 a year. A new redevelopment complex is under construction in the downtown area in the City's Waterfront District. Ground was recently broken for a 102-room hotel in that area. These and other projects should provide the City with significantly larger sources of tax revenues.

Finding and Recommendations

Finding 1 - A mobile modular unit was leased in July 2007 for office space to be used by the detectives. As of the date of this report, the unit is not being used.

Recommendation 1 - The Suisun City Police Department should expedite its efforts to place the unit in service for its intended use.

Finding 2 - Communication between administration, staff, and rank and file is insufficient.

Recommendation 2 - The Suisun City Police Department should take steps to improve methods for effective communication. For example, conduct regular staff meetings, continue an open door policy, state the intent of any change and seek additional input from rank and file prior to policy changes.

Finding 3 - Several areas of training mandated by the Peace Officer Standards and Training Commission are deficient. These areas include: Perishable Skills such as tactical firearms, arrest and control, and driver training; First Aid, CPR, racial profiling, diversity and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Recommendation 3 - The Suisun City Police Department, when conducting its annual training-needs assessment, should ensure that training records are current to include all continued professional officer training requirements. The Police Department should continue to pursue and obtain POST funds for all mandated training.

Finding 4 - Currently, Suisun City Police Department is unable to offer an attractive starting salary package to prospective recruits and lateral transfers.

Recommendation 4 - As anticipated revenues increase, Suisun City should consider increasing the Police Department's budget so that they can attract, recruit and retain qualified personnel.

Finding 5 - Morale is low in the Suisun City Police Department.

Recommendation 5 - The Police Department should take action to improve morale by improving communications and training.

Finding 6 - Fuel purchases and the record keeping of fuel usage are not being monitored sufficiently.

Recommendation 6 - The Police Department should require that fuel purchases be substantiated with receipts that include mileage information, signed by the purchaser, and be submitted to the Department's Fleet Manager for verification. Fuel cards should be assigned to each vehicle, instead of to each individual.

Finding 7 - During 2007, a Suisun City Police Department assigned vehicle was routinely used by an individual to travel in excess of 170 miles one way to his residence at the end of his work week. In February 2008, a new department policy authorized home-garaging of a Police Department vehicle only when an employee or a team of employees was subject to a high frequency of emergency call-outs or inspections.

Recommendation 7 - All vehicles currently assigned to an individual should be in accordance with present Police Department policy.

Finding 8 - At the time of our investigation, Suisun City Police Department's command structure appeared to be ineffective. The Commander position was filled on a part-time basis and one sergeant appeared to be performing an inordinate amount of administrative duties.

Recommendation 8 - With the hiring of a full time Commander, the Department should clarify its span of control and its chain of command.

Finding 9 - The 2007-2008 Grand Jury believes that five to ten officer related traffic accidents in a one year period is too high for a police department of this size.

Recommendation 9 - The Suisun City Police Department should implement a refresher driver-training program that emphasizes defensive driving techniques.

Finding 10 - The Suisun City Police Department owns two fully equipped motorcycles that are used occasionally.

Recommendation 10 - The Suisun City Police Department should maximize the use of its motorcycles.

Comments

The Grand Jury began its investigation into the operations of the Suisun City Police Department in the Fall of 2007. In addition to reviewing many records and documents, we heard testimony from a complainant, city administrators, more than a dozen members from every level of the Department and others. During the course of our investigation, the Department made changes in its practices and policies. Perhaps some of these changes were inspired, or at least accelerated, by the very fact of our investigation.

The Department, and its Chief, are to be commended for the progress that has been made. However, more progress is still possible. We heard expressions of low morale; the need for improved intra-office communications; the need to ensure that each officer receives the required continued professional training in essential officer skills; and the desire for a more competitive wage structure. To some extent, these concerns are addressed in policy statements in the recently revised General Orders Manual. It is now up to the administration to follow through on the promises made therein.

On a larger scale, by approving new commercial developments, the City of Suisun City is placing an increased emphasis on improving its sales tax revenues. Ultimately, the City and its citizens will decide how much of these added revenues will be used to increase the size and the salaries, of its Police Department.

It would seem that improved law enforcement would be good for the entire community. All employees should feel confident in their ability to perform their tasks, that their in-put and suggestions are worthy of management consideration, that their training needs and requirements are given the highest management priority and that they are providing the best service possible for the citizens they serve.

Affected Agencies

- City of Suisun City Police Department
- City of Suisun City, City Manager
- City of Suisun City, City Council

Courtesy Copy

- Solano County Department of General Services, Fleet Management Division
- California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training