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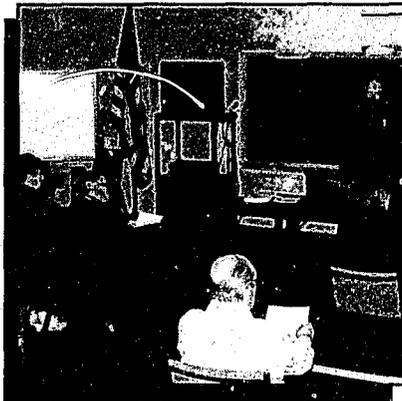
## **Law Enforcement Bulletin**



***The Americans with Disabilities Act***



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**The Cover:** *The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified individuals who are disabled. See article p. 25.*

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William S. Sessions, Director

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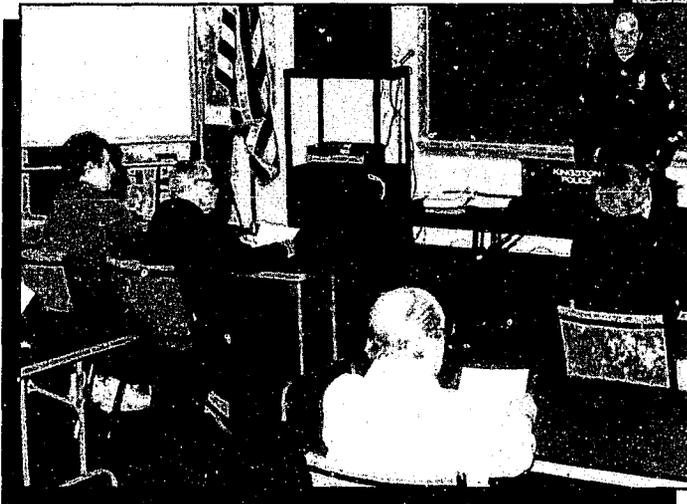
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# Citizen Police Academies

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**D**uring the past 2 decades, law enforcement has expanded the involvement of private citizens in community-based crime prevention efforts. The nature of the public's involvement depends on the individual department. Usually, local police departments center their efforts on one or two programs and invite the public to participate. One such program for citizens is the citizen police academy.

Basically, citizen police academies provide a mechanism for educating the public about the criminal justice system and the ways to resist crime. The overall goals are to gain support for police work, explain

the operations of police agencies, and encourage private citizens to undertake appropriate security measures. Typically, police personnel conduct the classes, which are coordinated by community relations units.

This article gives an overview of citizen police academies and describes their inherent advantages and disadvantages. It then addresses ways to expand the scope of such academies.

## Overview

In 1977, the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary designed a program to familiarize private citi-

zens with the nature of police work and the organization of the police system in the United Kingdom. The course, known as the "Police Night School," met for 10 consecutive Wednesday evenings and was conducted by police personnel on a volunteer basis. The success of this program prompted other British police departments to imitate it.<sup>1</sup>

Eight years later, in 1985, the Orlando, Florida, Police Department organized the first citizen police academy in the United States. Modeled after the British Police Night School, the academy convened 1 evening a week for 10 weeks. Also, participants were given an option to

complete a short course on the use of police sidearms and to ride as observers with officers on patrol.<sup>2</sup> Graduates of the citizen police academy received a departmental cap, certificate of completion, and a commemorative paperweight.<sup>3</sup>

Other U.S. communities followed Orlando's lead. The Missouri City, Texas, Police Department introduced its first citizen police academy in 1986. Media announcements attracted academy participants, who were screened through background checks. This program's success resulted in the expansion of the academy to 11 evening sessions and the incorporation of firearms practice and safety training as a regular part of the curriculum. Several followup activities implemented by the police department, such as a quarterly newsletter and special invitations to police public relations activities, kept interest in the program alive.

In Commerce City, Colorado, the police department recruited participants for its first citizen police academy through personal contacts. The curriculum, initially based on the regular police academy schedule, was condensed into 11 nightly sessions and some weekend activities. The extra sessions were devoted to firearms practice and safety training, ride-alongs, and the use of department vehicles on the department's driving course. From the outset, departmental officials, personnel from other criminal justice services, and community members (e.g., news media representatives) served as instructors or special guest lecturers. Police department instructors also volunteered, but were

given compensatory time off for their participation.

### **Advantages of Current Programs**

The public's involvement in a citizen police academy expands community-based crime prevention efforts. Academy participants become better prepared to cope with criminal incidents, are more willing to report crime, and realize the need to testify when they observe a crime. They also gain an understanding of police procedures that is more reflective of everyday police work than what is portrayed by the media. This helps to reduce complaints about routine police matters.

Participants in academy classes also learn how they can help to make their communities crime-free. They become sources for new ideas or provide ways to better educate the public. For example, a bank executive, who participated in a citizen

police academy, offered to include crime prevention messages in the monthly statements mailed to depositors.<sup>4</sup>

For police departments, citizen police academies provide an avenue to learn about the concerns of community members. These academies encourage police interaction with the public, which can augment police job satisfaction and provide a measure of accountability to the community.

At the same time, police departments can use a citizen police academy to recruit individuals into the profession. They can also emphasize specific problems in the course of instruction, that is, types of crime that are specific to the locale.

The use of guest instructors from other agencies furthers inter-agency cooperation. In addition, these academies are a means to increase morale within a department as a result of the internal cooperation neces-

**“ ...citizen police academies provide a mechanism for educating the public about the criminal justice system.... ”**



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**“The public’s involvement in a citizen police academy expands community-based crime prevention efforts.”**

sary for organizing the academy program.

### **Disadvantages**

While citizen police academies offer several avenues to police departments to encourage community support, they also have their disadvantages. First, two of the existing programs have been designed for suburban communities with relatively low populations. Consequently, the programs reach only a small number of residents and probably are not suited to urban areas.

Inherently, some academy instructors could lose sight of the goal of citizen police academies. They might overlay the public relations aspects and curtail the delivery of more useful information about the realities of policing and the ability of the criminal justice system to contend with crime.

At the same time, planning activities for the academy, such as preparing curriculum and screening applicants, may detract from the time

and resources needed for routine police work. In addition, local liability considerations may limit or eliminate high-interest activities, such as firearms instruction and ride-alongs. And while the expenditures needed to maintain a citizen police academy are supposedly minimal, instruction may be costly if volunteer instructors are unavailable. For example, in Commerce City, Colorado, firearms training was preceded by a 3-hour orientation class, and individual instructors were provided for each student while on the firing range.

Police departments need to maintain citizen interest when the academy ends. This is difficult unless followup activities are planned. A few months after completing the academy, some participants may be disappointed if all they have to show for their efforts are a cap or T-shirt, a certificate, and memories.

Academies could also turn into victims of their own success. Participants could become so overzealous in their concern for justice that

they engage in conduct that undermines departmental policies and programs, e.g., establishing a vigilante-type neighborhood patrol organization.

Another area of concern is the number of requests for crime prevention speakers and home and business security surveys that academy participation may generate. While this is not a disadvantage, per se, such requests could overburden officers by increasing their workload.

### **Recommendations**

The existing citizen police academies demonstrate a willingness on the part of local police departments to share information with the general public. However, their efforts should merely be considered as a beginning, especially if large metropolitan areas adopt this initiative.

Obviously, achieving the support and cooperation of diverse segments of a metropolitan population will require more than an annual course for a few hand-picked participants. A better approach would be for urban police departments to use their resources to train and certify classes of citizen volunteer instructors who would then be qualified to offer a series of continuous free courses to the public. This would allow for all age groups, sooner or later, to learn a variety of self-help skills.

Moreover, since graduates of the certification program are expected to become future teachers of citizen police academies, concern about followup activities diminishes signifi-

cantly. And if departments want to maintain close supervision of citizen instructors, they could include the program as part of a new or existing auxiliary or reserve police unit.

Another recommendation is to apply a much broader term to these academies, such as "neighborhood police academy." This term emphasizes the importance of people working together for the betterment of the community and works to broaden the format of the academies. Future participants might be drawn from occupations holding peace officer status, such as correctional personnel and reserve officers.

### Increased Scope

By expanding the role of these police academies, most of the current disadvantages would be reduced. For example, newly certified citizen instructors would be more motivated to concentrate on crime prevention topics and less likely to overemphasize public relations. Their services can be used to develop new curriculum guides or to expand and revise current materials for diverse populations. They could also serve to augment the department's personnel resources as crime prevention speakers and home security inspectors.

If made part of a police auxiliary or reserve unit, the department maintains the interest of volunteer instructors. In turn, upon completion of a certification class, highly qualified reservists could increase the availability of firearms instructors for one-on-one safety instruction and practice. Also, in the event regular patrol officers are unavail-

able to accommodate a citizens' ride-along program, auxiliary or reserve officers could be used. Finally, the existence of a volunteer police unit that has been thoroughly trained, closely guided, and given meaningful assignments would reduce the possibility that overzealous course participants might establish their own independent vigilante-type patrols.

### Conclusion

As FBI Director William S. Sessions stated, "We need citizen involvement more than ever today."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, police agencies should not hesitate to enlist the services of their law-abiding community members. Without the cooperation of victims and witnesses in reporting crime and testifying about what they saw, criminals would be virtually held unaccountable for their actions.

Moreover, additional human resources are urgently needed to provide educational programs in urban areas (e.g., family abuse prevention, etc.). By expanding the current model of citizen police academies, departments take one step forward in resolving many of the crime problems facing their communities.

**LEB**

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> R. Ferguson, "The Citizen Police Academy," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, vol. 54, No. 9, September 1985, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> J. Seelmeyer, "A Citizen's Police Academy," *Law and Order*, vol. 35, No. 12, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> W. Sessions, "Director's Message," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, vol. 57, No. 10, October 1988, p. 1.

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