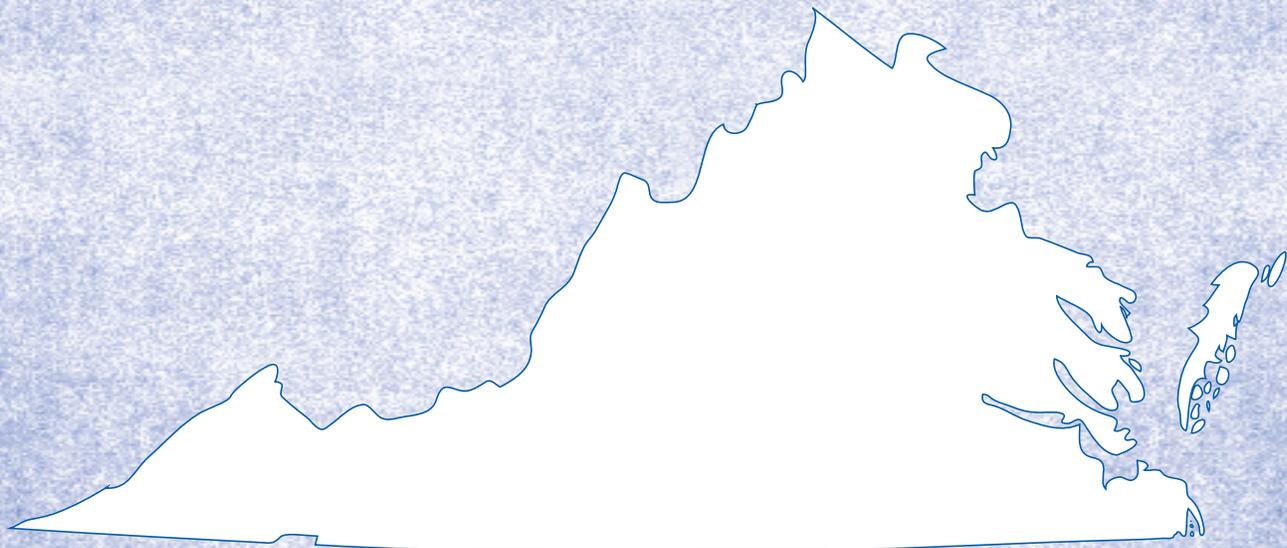


Blueprints for Change: Criminal Justice Policy Issues in Virginia



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACCREDITATION IN VIRGINIA



Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
www.dcjs.virginia.gov

December, 2008
Richmond, Virginia



The Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) is the state criminal justice planning agency in Virginia and is responsible for administering state and federal funds dedicated to improving state and local criminal justice practices, preventing crime and delinquency, and ensuring services to crime victims.

In its role as a planning agency, the Department convened three policy sessions over a two day period in December, 2008. The facilitated sessions explored different leading edge criminal justice issues, chosen by the Department. Each three-hour session brought together a multidisciplinary group of executive-level participants who were selected because of their knowledge of the issue and their ability to advance the discussion of public policy related to the issue.

The discussions in these sessions, and the recommendations that emerged, are recorded in these policy papers.

In publishing these papers, DCJS hopes that they will stimulate further discussions by state and local decision makers and will provide useful guidance for making substantive statutory change where necessary, as well as for decisions on funding, and policy and program development.

The 2008 Blueprints for Change: Criminal Justice Policy Issues in Virginia documents are:

Sanctions and Penalties for Underage Drinking

Addressing Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Across Systems

Law Enforcement Accreditation in Virginia

**For additional information on these documents, please visit the
Department of Criminal Justice Services website at: www.dcjs.virginia.gov**

Law Enforcement Accreditation in Virginia



INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The first program to offer accreditation of law enforcement agencies based on their meeting comprehensive, rigorous standards was established in 1979 through the joint efforts of the major national law enforcement executive associations: the International Association of Chiefs of Police; the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives; the National Sheriffs' Association; and the Police Executive Research Forum. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) issued its first accreditation of a law enforcement agency in 1984.

Virginia's accreditation program, established through the collaboration of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police (VACP), the Virginia Sheriffs' Association (VSA) and the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), began in the early 1990's. It is overseen by the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission (VLEPSC), consisting of representatives of the VACP/VSA; staffing is provided by DCJS.

Both programs involve self-assessments by participating departments as well as on-site review by outside assessors. Participation in either the national or state accreditation program is completely voluntary.

There are now 72 law enforcement agencies in Virginia that have achieved accreditation through the VLEPSC program; approximately 23 agencies have been accredited by CALEA. Together they represent about one fifth of all law enforcement agencies in the Commonwealth. Once the 45 agencies now in the self-assessment phase of the VLEPSC process complete their work approximately one-third of all law enforcement agencies in Virginia will be accredited either nationally or through VLEPSC.

From the outset, accreditation has been seen as an effective tool for strengthening law enforcement, increasing its professionalism and improving quality and delivery of services.

With CALEA now almost 30 years old and Virginia's program approaching 15 years of operation, it is an appropriate time to look at the impact of accreditation. To do so, DCJS convened a panel of law enforcement executives and experts from both police departments and sheriffs' offices as part of its "Blueprints for Change" series of policy discussions. Panelists were asked to discuss their experiences with accreditation and to assess accreditation's effects on law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Included in the panel were campus law enforcement executives as well as leaders from non-accredited state and local agencies who are currently seeking accredited status. The discussion revolved around the following questions.



QUESTIONS

How has accreditation changed law enforcement in the Commonwealth?

What is the affect of accreditation on the issue of liability?

How have communities benefited from their local agencies being accredited?

How have agency leaders benefited from their agencies being accredited?

How have police officers/deputies benefited from their employers being accredited?

How can we promote and support accreditation for those not yet involved?

Are there cost issues that stand in the way of achieving accredited status?

Are there cost issues that stand in the way of sustainability of accredited status?

Should accredited agencies receive preferential consideration in the grants application process over those that are not accredited?



DISCUSSION

After brief introductory comments covering the history of the state and national accreditation programs, the panel moved into its discussion of the questions posed.

1. There was general agreement among the panelists that the existence of accreditation has changed law enforcement in a number of positive ways. Among them:

Increased professionalism. Panelists noted that law enforcement used to be seen as a “trade” and that accreditation has been important in elevating it to the status of “profession” by pushing participating agencies to meet comprehensive, recognized statewide and national standards. In the case of some departments, such as campus police departments, achieving accreditation in effect validates them as bona fide law enforcement agencies.

Increased accountability and credibility. Achieving accreditation and periodically attaining re-accreditation means that a department operates according to established standards governing policy and practice. The department’s performance, then, can be judged objectively on an ongoing basis by how well and consistently it meets those standards. This can give the department greater credibility in the eyes of the citizens it serves and the governing body to which it is responsible.

Management. Participating in an accreditation program requires management to know and examine all aspects of a department’s operations in light of the accreditation standards. As law enforcement becomes increasingly complex, participation in an accreditation program can drive agency management to continuously review their policies and keep them up-to-date with emerging technology, case law, and new methods and philosophies. Further, reliance on established standards provides a sound basis for discipline if it becomes necessary.

Interagency cooperation. Panelists agreed that cooperation and establishing mutual aid agreements among agencies are facilitated when they meet the same standards. The panel also noted that some agencies in an area achieving accreditation can exert “peer pressure” on others to follow suit.

Recruiting/hiring. A department’s status as having achieved accreditation has proved valuable in recruiting, according to several panelists. Potential applicants look for evidence of a department’s commitment to professionalism and high standards. Accreditation also serves to insulate a department from political pressure in its hiring practices.

2. In their discussion about the relationship between accreditation and liability, the panelists were clear that departments should assume they will, at some point, be sued. The question is not whether it will happen but when, making it essential that the agency be well-prepared to defend its policies and practices.

Department policies and practices that have been validated through accreditation were seen by the panelists as more defensible in the event of a lawsuit. Further, accreditation provides a set of measures

that can help insurers determine the degree of risk they face in providing liability insurance and can potentially lower insurance premiums.

However, the panel emphasized that accreditation should be considered only one aspect of risk management. Leadership should not expect that accreditation, in and of itself, will fully protect a department in a liability lawsuit.

3. In addition to its value to law enforcement as a profession, panel members noted that accreditation brings benefits to the communities served. For example, a department's accreditation can strengthen the public's confidence that the agency is a good steward of taxpayer dollars and provides consistent, quality service.

Accreditation can also be a public education and marketing tool. In explaining to community leaders that its services and officers are held to professional standards, an accredited agency is also providing information about how it works. This, in turn, can foster more willingness by citizens to respond positively to the department's outreach efforts; this, of course, complements the community policing approach many departments are implementing that depends on close cooperation and trust between law enforcement officers and the public.

The panel also suggested that there may be economic development benefits associated with accreditation because businesses find areas with accredited law enforcement agencies to be more attractive for expansion or relocation.

4. The panel included Sheriffs and chiefs of police from accredited departments who provided their perspectives on the benefits of accreditation to law enforcement executives. Primary among them was the fact that accreditation is based on established, objective standards. Meeting them is largely within the control of the department and its leadership and thus provides a better measure of performance than merely tracking changes in crime rates which are affected by many variables beyond the reach of law enforcement.

Additionally, the accreditation process affords a chief or sheriff the opportunity to demonstrate leadership by pushing the department to meet standards, including implementing new programs or practices if necessary. Leading a department through the process is thus good for the agency as a whole as well as for the career of the chief or sheriff.

During this part of the session, the panel discussed the use of financial incentives to encourage agencies to become accredited. They heard specifically about the Compensation Board's accreditation incentive and certification programs. Members expressed concern that accreditation should not be directly linked to salary or other types of financial incentives. The panelists felt that accreditation required the cooperation and participation of the entire agency, and that offering financial incentives directed solely to the CEO sends the wrong message about the purposes and intent of accreditation.

5. Panelists articulated a number of benefits that officers below the executive level gain from working in accredited agencies. They noted, for example, the positive effect it can have on an officer's career; job applicants who come from accredited agencies tend to get better consideration during hiring processes. Also important to officers are the safety benefits of working to standards (e.g. wearing vests), as well as the professionalism that accreditation fosters and the resulting boost in morale.
6. The panel's discussion of ways to support and promote accreditation encompassed both the issue of costs and the need for the law enforcement community to encourage participation. The costs of Virginia's program are considered minimal and tend to reflect improvements and changes that the agency should be making with current resources. No substantive suggestions were offered for funding program requirements from outside the agency.

With regard to encouraging participation, panel members suggested that leaders of accredited agencies take it upon themselves to, in effect, mentor colleagues in non-accredited agencies to encourage them to begin the process.

Another useful strategy mentioned was including information about accreditation in law enforcement training, either as part of basic training at the law enforcement academies or by Field Training Officers once recruits have completed the basic course. The panel felt that independent academies in accredited departments could include accreditation content in their basic courses. Even in regional academies, where not all member agencies are accredited, an overview of the accreditation program could be included.

Panel members noted CALEA's new "Flagship" level of accreditation which is more stringent than its "normal" accreditation standards. They encouraged the VLEPSC program to consider adopting something comparable in order to offer accredited agencies new challenges to meet, thus spurring greater interest and growth in the program.

The panel agreed that the best option for "growing" the state program, maintaining its independence and credibility, and keeping it affordable is to continue to house it at DCJS. They called on the state Sheriffs' and Chiefs' associations to mobilize their memberships behind the program and let legislators and the Governor know it should continue to have state support. There was consensus on the panel that neither association has the resources to sustain, let alone expand, the program if the support were to be eliminated at DCJS.

Other possibilities discussed for funding the program included obtaining grants or increasing and expanding the fees associated with the program. However, grant funding was not seen as a realistic possibility; and panel members feared that increased fees would result in decreases in participation.

- 7/8. The cost of attaining and keeping accredited status is always a concern, in the view of the panel members, more so if an agency seeks accreditation through the higher cost CALEA process. In these times of budget reductions, keeping the costs of participation as low as possible is essential and it becomes even more important to let elected officials and other beneficiaries and supporters know how valuable the accreditation program is.
9. There appeared to be no clear consensus on the question of making accredited status a criterion for awarding grant funds. On one hand, some panelists felt that this could be useful as an incentive to encourage more departments to participate. However, there was also concern that offering a grant funding incentive would undermine the purely voluntary nature of accreditation.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken as a whole, the panel's discussion throughout this "Blueprints" session represents a strong endorsement of accreditation programs in law enforcement. They contribute significantly to improvements in the law enforcement services provided to communities, help to generate public confidence in and support for law enforcement, and benefit law enforcement officers and executives.

In the course of their discussion, the panel members offered recommendations to maintain and strengthen accreditation in Virginia.

The state program should continue to reside in DCJS, which has the expertise and capability to operate it. Keeping the program in DCJS also preserves its independence.

State funding to support the program is essential to keep it alive and keep it affordable. Virginia's law enforcement community, led by the Sheriffs' and Chiefs' associations, should advocate on behalf of the program to secure the support of the Governor and members of the General Assembly.

The state program should consider developing and implementing an "exceptional" level of accreditation for agencies, comparable to CALEA's "Flagship" program.

Independent and regional law enforcement training academies should consider including accreditation-related content in their training courses.

To get more departments involved, leaders of accredited departments should mentor their colleagues in non-accredited agencies to encourage their participation.

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