

BUTLER: Police seeking national accreditation



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By DENNIS BUTLER, Ottawa Police Chief

The Ottawa Police Department has submitted an application to the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA®). This two- to three-year application process adopts a proven modern management model that once implemented presents the police chief or sheriff, on a continuing basis, with a blueprint that focuses on professionalism, accountability, the efficient use of resources and improved service delivery — regardless of the size, geographic location or functional responsibilities of the agency.

CALEA uses a voluntary process in which law enforcement agencies agree to be assessed every three years by police professionals from other CALEA-accredited agencies. This is done to determine if the agency meets national standards considered to be best practices in law enforcement operations, policies and protocols. The Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2008 reported 12,501 local police departments were operating in the U.S. with the equivalent of at least one full-time officer. According to CALEA's database, about 400 (slightly more than 3 percent) of these departments have met their standards. In Kansas, the City of Salina, Riley County, KU Medical Center Police Departments, and the Shawnee County Sheriff's Office meet these standards. We now join the Topeka and Andover Police Departments as current applicants to CALEA. When we become accredited, we will be the smallest municipal police department in Kansas to earn this distinction.

Chesterfield, Mo., Police Chief Ray Johnson, one of CALEA's commissioners, was an assessor during the recent inspection process at the Shawnee County Sheriff's Office, which just met accreditation standards for the third time. Johnson used the following analogy to describe the importance of local law enforcers being accredited: "If a person is hungry and goes to a restaurant to eat, but they don't like the service or the food is substandard, they don't have to go back. That person can next time locate a restaurant with better standards." He added, "Residents within a law enforcement jurisdiction don't have the option of choice. When they need services from law enforcement, the same agency responds each time."

Johnson's analogy illustrates how customers look for better service when there are choices. When a law enforcement monopoly exists, as it does in most communities, accreditation increases the chances that policing is conducted professionally and ethically. Therefore, Ottawa residents will be invited to provide their input in the final stages of our application process.

With a little more than 3 percent of law enforcement agencies accredited, it is common to hear others in policing dismiss accreditation as unnecessary, with no need to have outsiders telling them how to run their agencies. I know from personal experience that these sentiments are misguided because that is not what accreditation is all about. Seeking accreditation is a huge challenge requiring much hard work. It can be stressful and humbling to realize how many organizational changes may occur to adopt the best practices in law enforcement, and our police department should not be afraid to learn where we can improve. With current resources, there is no reason I can think of to deny our residents the best possible local law enforcement services. It is important to note that the Ottawa Police Foundation already has devoted resources now and committed to do more in the future to help defray the costs associated with meeting accreditation standards.

Law enforcement is not a static profession. If your local police department is to succeed in providing excellent service, it must be flexible, adaptable, willing to acknowledge and correct mistakes, and remember that it exists for one reason — to serve you. It does not exist to promote personal agendas, or to provide favors to a select few because they enjoy a special relationship with local law enforcement or because of certain social status.

When asked how things are going at the Ottawa Police Department, I often reply that providing good customer service is one of our most important objectives, even for people who don't want our services. This means that no matter if someone is a victim, suspect, arrestee, witness or a visitor asking for directions, we should always treat them with dignity and respect — even when their actions may not warrant either.

We encounter many people on a daily basis, many of whom through repeated poor decision-making cause the situations in which the police become involved. Instead of becoming frustrated and treating these residents badly, I remind my staff to remember how blessed and fortunate they are not to experience similar problems in their own lives. One should not interpret this to mean our agency is soft on crime, because we are not, but arresting criminals and writing tickets is just part of what we are here to do when providing comprehensive and excellent customer service. We also interact with residents who need us for the first time in their lives and to the best of our ability we want to leave them with a positive impression.

It is obvious from Johnson's analogy that when there is a monopoly on services, especially government ones, residents have little or no choice when using those services. Therefore, it makes sense that residents should trust their local law enforcement and be confident in the quality of services they receive.

As your police chief, I am constantly evaluating both my own performance and that of my staff because the learning never stops. There is always room for improvement. After serving for several years in the same job or rank, it is easy for cops to become stale and lackadaisical. Some may begin to lose perspective about the overall purpose of their chosen profession. The CALEA accreditation process is a constant reminder of how to avoid this common pitfall.

Regardless of whether someone lives in Overland Park, Olathe or Ottawa, they deserve professional and responsive law enforcement services. After serving you for eight years as the Ottawa police chief, I believe your police department already is on the path to excellence, something you should expect as both taxpayers and free citizens.

With support from our governing body, the Ottawa Police Foundation, and ongoing support and encouragement from Ottawa residents, it is my hope that becoming a CALEA-certified law enforcement agency will keep us on the path to providing excellent law enforcement services.

Dennis P. Butler is Ottawa police chief.