

Opinion Page

POLICE NEED PROTECTION

Police unions. The term produces varied responses from town fathers and citizens alike. Binding arbitration equally shares those feelings. Police departments have always been a necessary evil in most communities. Most citizens support the police department, while politicians seem to keep police in the background. Of course, when it benefits them to highlight their departments, they come out in grandeur.

Police officers in Vermont appear to belong to several different pension plans and unions, and most smaller agencies do not have any town ordinances or rules and regulations to govern them. Even the state statutes are vague at best. This is by design, as towns can hold job security and tenure over the officers and may change the rules of the game as they go along. This is a very poor system and very frustrating for law enforcement.

There is an old adage that there is strength in numbers and that is so true. Witness the teachers union. All departments should strive to make their positions secure. That feeling of security makes for better performing officers, as they know where they are going and what is expected of them.

Ideally, there should be one police union covering all of the police officers in the state. This should be the Vermont Police Association. Most officers do belong to the VPA and should not belong to unions that cover clerical workers and other municipal government personnel. Through one union membership, laws may be lobbied for — such as binding arbitration. Binding arbitration panels consisting of VPA members who can respond to act as the union representatives for negotiations and contracts. By empowering a small panel of officers from without the negotiating department, the possibility of confrontation with employees

and their bosses is kept out of the process.

The union can lobby for a police officers bill of rights, which would cover officers in their dealings with the municipality, county, state, etc. Those rights can cover "due process" when officers are brought up on charges. Unfortunately, it does happen, and unless an officer sues for a violation of due process under federal title, they do not have any set law to back them up.

Police unions can be money saving venues in that a town has a coverage for its employees and the cost is dependent on the number of employees in the plan. On a statewide basis, the plans could be provided at a reduced cost to the municipality, county, etc., due to the number of members in that coverage; this will thereby save the employers a great deal of money in tax dollars.

These unions can also negotiate to encompass all police officers in the state in the same retirement plan. This can be beneficial to all, as it may cut down on the number of officers moving from department to department to secure better benefits and retirement options. A unified pension system saves money in its administration, as the various systems could be incorporated into the state under one plan, with a uniform cost to all concerned. Retirements would then be the same for all members of the law enforcement community. The investments of those funds could reap much more lucrative benefits for all concerned.

Of course, individual departments should ensure that there is a police ordinance to cover that town. I wrote both the ordinance and rules and regulations for the department I was employed by. I can attest to their effectiveness in the daily routine of the officers employed, and the town leaders in their dealings with the department.

No one likes authority, even police

officers. However, we all crave discipline and responsibility which go hand-in-hand. Witness the child of a liberal parent, who constantly acts up and is never disciplined. They know they can do anything and will never be punished. Psychologists tell us that discipline is necessary for society to function. We all need laws and rules to live by or there would be chaos. All police departments need rules and regulations to enable their members to perform their tasks in a legal, moral and professional manner.

Rules and regulations should cover all aspects of the police function, from ethics through disciplinary actions. These rules and regulations, when implemented, become a part of the officers' routine as they know what is expected of them and know what to expect if they violate those rules and regulations. It can dictate unit responsibilities, tables of organization, and rights of the officers, to name a few. Rules and regulations can go a long way in limiting the civil liability of the town. Without specific rules and regulations, an officer could inadvertently create a civil liability for the community and place him or herself in legal peril.

In these modern times police officers need all the protection and coverage they can get and these steps are necessary to secure those protections. Support the VPA, strive to achieve excellence in your chosen vocation. Be proud of your profession, as it is the most honorable profession in the world. Above all, be compassionate in your dealings with the public and strong when you must be. And always, always wear your vests and be safe.

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