

Teamwork + Problem Solving in Police Leadership

When current managers and supervisors retire, law enforcement agencies, like all employers, need qualified leaders to fill the vacated positions. A national professional development program specifically for law enforcement personnel – sworn officers of all ranks and also their non-sworn colleagues – has become a strong and effective resource for police agencies across Vermont. The **Leadership in Police Organizations (LPO)** course, a product of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), has been embraced by the Vermont State Police (VSP), the Burlington Police Department, and VLCT PACIF as an important tool in developing law enforcement leaders. LPO uses a collaborative approach that thrives on participation from law enforcement groups of all types, including state police; other state departments including Fish and Wildlife, Motor Vehicles, and the Office of the Attorney General; local police; county sheriffs; and campus police. Vermont's LPO courses welcome attendants from inside our borders as well as from neighboring jurisdictions. In the ten times that the LPO training has been held in Vermont, only a handful of Vermont municipalities have put more than one officer through the LPO training, which means many other cities and towns have yet to make good use of this excellent resource.

There is no fee for this training because the costs are covered by VSP, the Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council (VCJTC), and PACIF. Even so, as with most worthwhile endeavors, an investment of time is necessary. Each LPO course starts with a half-day orientation, then meets for one full week a month in three consecutive months. The first week, all students become acquainted in a single group as they begin to learn the program's behavioral science approach to leading, initially from the perspective of the individual. Material is presented in a combination of classroom instruction, small group discussion, and hands-on scenarios, and trainees do homework every night. Before long, the 36 students are divided into six teams, and from then on they work closely with their teammates. In the second week, while the students learn about team dynamics, each team chooses a current challenge facing the law enforcement community and begins to research and explore the underpinnings and ramifications of the problem. The third week, when the instruction focuses on leadership theory and organization-wide dynamics, the teams arrive at possible solutions for their chosen problem, determine practical ways to implement those solutions, and create presentations to explain their topic clearly. Each course officially closes with a daylong event in which the students' superior officers and other program supporters look on while the teams conduct their final presentations professionally and persuasively. Then the individuals are awarded their Certificates of Completion.

The closing ceremony is actually a beginning, because all participants return to their agencies to share a wealth of new information and ways to communicate. They have delved deeply into the topic of their own group's presentation and have also become acquainted with the content of every other team's presentation. They have learned compelling principles of leadership and explored how these principles operate on individuals, groups, and organizations. Moreover, along the way, participants have forged professional relationships with colleagues from a broad range of law enforcement organizations.

LPO instructors are seasoned law enforcement officers who have already been through the LPO training and who use IACP-sanctioned materials and methods. Every three-week course is led by two

nationally qualified instructors who often bring in one or more local or regional instructors to teach particular half-day modules. Vermont has two National LPO instructors – Bruce Bovat, Deputy Chief of Operations of the Burlington Police Department, and Jennifer Morrison, Chief of Police of the Town of Colchester – in addition to one of the highest level, LPO Master Instructor Major William D. Sheets, Executive Officer and Support Service Division Commander of VSP. Major Sheets recently earned this designation after years as a National Instructor and a leading force in Vermont’s LPO program. As a master, he will help to continually enhance and update the curriculum that is used by all instructors.

Chief Morrison has had eight members of the Colchester Police Department take the LPO training, and more are scheduled to attend this year. “We are also starting to cycle our non-sworn staff through the training,” she says. “In a perfect world, all employees would have LPO training so we can all talk the same language and approach problem solving the same way.” She also sees value for each trainee as an individual. “The skills and strategies learned in LPO are transferable far beyond the workplace. Many are just as relevant to other relationships, such as parenting or coaching.” Yet Morrison is not myopic in her estimation of the LPO program. “We also use the Roger Williams University First Line Supervisor Course. The two are completely different types of training, and they complement each other very well.”

Rick Hebert, Chief of the Winooski Police Department, has sent four officers so far, has three scheduled for each of the next two trainings (LPO #11 this spring and LPO#12 next fall), and will start sending dispatch staff members next year (LPO#13). “The group dynamic sets the LPO program apart from standard classroom training,” he says. “These trainees learn first-hand that every problem can have several good solutions, because when six groups are given the same problem to solve, they arrive at six completely different solutions *which are all valid*. In a very short period of time, these students both develop deep decision-making skills of their own and gain insight into how colleagues can arrive at different decisions.” The department pays for transportation and incurs the cost of replacement staff for three weeks – an investment in the agency’s future which Hebert doesn’t hesitate to make.

As Major Sheets of the VSP says, “In the 21st century, police departments can no longer rely only on solitary leaders. Instead, these organizations must foster a culture in which all officers can and do take leadership roles at their various levels of responsibility. Doing so will yield positive changes and set the stage for organizational success.”

VLCT PACIF strongly agrees with all the points made by Morrison, Hebert, and Sheets. That is why we encourage member police departments to make use of these accessible, affordable, and forward-thinking LPO trainings by enrolling at least one employee every time the course is offered. The next opportunity requires registering by the end of June for LPO #12, which begins in August. (Please visit <http://vcjtc.vermont.gov/training/courses/leadership> for details.) Municipalities that are too far from Pittsford to commute should email losscontrol@vlct.org to ask if they are eligible for a PACIF Scholarship to defray lodging costs.

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