

## **Cops Gone Wild!**

By Captain Perry Hollowell – 1/11/11

Some would have you believe that law enforcement has in fact gone wild and they portray officers as unethical and irresponsible. Many claim they long for the “good old days” when law enforcement was more trusted and officers walked a beat.

Lets us examine the first part, that law enforcement has gone wild. We must first realize that one of the reasons there are so many reports of officers violating ethical standards and committing law violations is not necessarily because violations are occurring in greater numbers than ever before. With current technology we now get instant notification of law enforcement’s bad deeds.

At every scene we have numerous instruments with the capability to take video or still photographs. Most all current cellular phones have at least this feature and some can send it directly to a news agency anywhere in the country. So it may not be that there are more occurrences, but now few go unnoticed. With current technology we see what happens across the country, before many incidents were confined to a limited area simply because of logistics.

Forty years ago in the “good old days”, rather we want to admit it or not, law enforcement protected its own. If you entered law enforcement in the 1970’s think about what you were exposed to. Even if you felt like something was wrong, what were you told by the “veteran officers” about keeping things to yourself? Today many of those questionable common practices of old would be quickly exposed. Better policing of law enforcement activity from within has added to the number of incidents brought forth.

Looking at the facts it seems that if anything we are getting better about policing our profession from within. Many times people think there is an increase in a certain issue when in fact it is the reporting system getting better; this has happened over the years with crime reporting. It is most likely true here, not more incidents just a better reporting system. These two issues alone will account for hundreds of reported incidents that went unreported in years passed.

Ethical issues always seem to spark debate and ruffle feathers, but certainly require close examination in the profession. Is law enforcement scrutinized more closely than other professions? The answer is an undeniable yes. This scrutiny holds officers to a higher ethical standard and quite frankly they should be. It does not matter if it is fair, it is fact and if ignored certainly one can expect negative fallout.

Something as simple as the age old controversy surrounding officers accepting free meals at their local fast food restaurant brings heated discussion from both sides. No law is broken, perhaps an agency has a policy against this, but for the most part it is up to the individual officer.

How officers develop ethically and morally is too complex to address here and is little value to administrators at this point. When an individual is hired by an agency they have already established beliefs. If an individual holds something as a value he/she will not be easily convinced to change. If your value system tells you it is wrong to accept a free meal all the explaining why it is "OK" will not convince you otherwise.

When an agency hires a new officer these values they hold dear, good or bad, come with them. So if we desire to make our profession more responsible for their actions it must be understood we will not change this person's value system, what you see is what you get.

Through training you may help officers make better decisions or at least adapt to the agency policy. Do not expect them to make tremendous changes. Most agencies conduct background investigations, but often miss clues as to the individual's value system. Sometimes we just flat ignore history and hire based on economics, who they know, or the hope they will change and the list goes on.

Possibly you have heard the term "gypsy cops" meaning they move from department to department because of issues that forced them to leave. Most everybody can relate to this situation; an officer is allowed to resign because of an issue rather than be fired. Often these issues are criminal or breeches of public trust. Shortly thereafter another agency hires the officer with predictably negative results.

Is the "gypsy cop" alive and well in Indiana, absolutely. Indiana is no different than any other state and as long as we are willing to tolerate their existence and provide a home they are not going anywhere.

You may have noticed there was no mention about how the news media tends to hammer law enforcement and sometimes it seems they go out of their way to make us look bad. While some of this is true, we can stop it by not providing them with material.

For all practical purposes, we are doing better than thirty years ago. It is a better reporting system that reaches a global audience and technology that allows most everybody the opportunity to become an on scene reporter. The fact we are more concerned about policing our profession and not turning a deaf ear to what takes place leads officers to challenge wrong doing amongst their ranks. There are other issues that support the theory that law enforcement is becoming more professional and the actual instance of law enforcement misdeeds is lower than at any other time in our profession.

So how do we make it even better? First and foremost we must stop hiring other agencies' problems. Take a close look at those that come to you seeking employment and are on their third or fourth agency. Past history predicts future events. Take particular notice of those that have criminal arrest records, even though they may be misdemeanor charges.

Make a complete investigation of the applicant no matter how well you think you know the subject. Get to the bottom of any arrest, while it may be a misdemeanor on court records, was it reduced from a felony? What were the circumstances? Is it different if the individual had a misdemeanor arrest for DUI prior to becoming an officer compared to a police officer in a marked vehicle becoming so intoxicated the public turned him in.

Provide training in the decision making process, just providing training in what ethics are comprised of will do little. We may get those officers that have a somewhat distorted view of ethical decision making to at least adapt to departmental policy and provide them tools to overcome the urge to base their decisions on past practice with the right training.

Do not be tentative about firing an officer who should be removed. We have all heard the excuses: if we let him resign there will not be a law suit, we do not want to see him lose his pension, we do not want to hinder him in finding future employment, etc. While difficult to face, when an officer breaks the law he becomes a criminal and should be treated as such.

For leaders to do the right thing it takes courage because often the right thing is not the most popular thing. If law enforcement is to mend a somewhat tattered image we must continue to police our profession from within and take strong leadership action.