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POLICE EXPLORERS: PROTECTING A VALUED ASSET

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Among the many valued programs offered by police departments to enhance their communities and develop young people are police explorer programs. The police explorer program was developed in the early 1970s to create opportunities for teens and young adults to consider a career in law enforcement through a comprehensive program of training, community service and practical experiences. These programs promote self-confidence, responsibility, good citizenship, physical fitness and stimulate an interest in law enforcement as a potential career choice.



Police explorer programs offer community youth a tremendous opportunity to investigate law enforcement careers while developing leadership skills and providing community service. Similarly, these programs allow local law enforcement agencies to create transparency within their community by opening a traditionally closed workplace and working with local youth to provide experiential training and life skills that develop young people whether they choose a law enforcement profession or a different career path.

Nationally, these programs have been deemed a tremendous success and many of those employed today as full-time police officers owe their early success to their participation in one of these programs. The overwhelming numbers of young people who participate in these programs leave the program with a greater understanding of work ethic, integrity and leadership that few other programs are able to match. Unfortunately, there have been instances of abuses that have marred an otherwise admirable program. What is more unfortunate is that many of these abusive actions were often both predictable and preventable.

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Opportunities for Abuse

The nature of law enforcement explorer programs creates opportunities for unprincipled police officers to take advantage of young people placed in their care. Historically, the ride-along program has presented an opportunity for abuse. Ride-alongs are a valued portion of any explorer program and creates the ability for explorers to participate in ride-alongs with on-duty officers. Ride-alongs allow the explorer to ride in a police car with an officer to see the reality of policing. Ride-alongs are frequently viewed by explorers as the most treasured moments of the exploring program. Explorers also participate in events that are held outside the police department and sometimes involve overnight stays. These types of events allow for one-on-one contact between the explorer and officer that may create an opportunity for abuse.

Indeed, there have been a number of instances of abuse by police officers perpetrated on explorers in their charge. A 2003 report documented thirty-one cases between 2002-03 and cautioned that the true extent of cases is not known because the abuse was not reported by the victim or by a media service that would allow researchers to track the events. Since that report was published, there have continued to be cases of abuse throughout the nation that have resulted in the arrest and conviction of police officers for sexual abuse of an explorer entrusted to their care.

Policy Considerations

Implicitly acknowledging inappropriate behavior between explorers and police officers, Learning for Life, the parent organization for the explorer program has developed a series of policy provisions to provide for the protection of the explorers and to protect adult leaders from situations in which they may be vulnerable to allegations of abuse by creating barriers and decreasing at risk situations. Police chiefs have a responsibility to protect the young people who participate in a police department sponsored program and should heed these procedures to prevent future instances of abuse between police officers and explorers.

Post Membership

Law enforcement exploring is open to young adults' ages 14 and graduated from the eighth grade, through 20, or age 15 through 20 years. Eligibility standards include:

- A hold harmless and release form for the agency and Learning for Life must be executed by the parents or legal guardian and/or the Explorer if of legal age to sign such a form.
- Must not have a prior conviction for a criminal offense or serious traffic offense.
- Must have and maintain a minimum of a 2.0 cumulative grade point (C) average (GPA) in high school or college to remain in the Post.

- Must complete a basic training course, to include Youth Protection: Personal Safety Awareness training, and a probationary period.
- Must undergo a thorough background review to assess character and integrity that will include interviews with neighbors, teachers and employers.
- Must keep body weight in proportion to height and maintain a high level of physical fitness.

The advisory staff shall complete a background investigation on all applicants. The background will ensure the applicant meets the Post minimum membership requirements. If a candidate fails to meet these requirements, the advisor should contact the candidate and family/parent to explain membership denial. Any candidate failing the background requirements may reapply for membership after a period of six months if they feel they now qualify for membership.

Two-Deep Leadership

The concept of two-deep leadership requires that two adult supervisors are required on all trips and outings. This is a minimum requirement and additional supervision may be necessary depending on the nature of the outing or the amount of explorers who are participating. Further, one of the adults must have completed the explorer program youth protection training. The logic behind two-deep leadership is relatively simple. While there is no system that can completely prevent abusive or inappropriate relationships between adult advisors and explorers the requirement of having two adult leaders present places additional barriers between the adults and the youth and these barriers may serve to prevent abuse.

No One-on-One Contact

One-on-one contact between adults and participants is not permitted, except for authorized ride-along programs. If an explorer advisor opts to conduct a personal conference with an explorer the conference must be conducted in an open room in plain view of others. Limiting one-on-one contact places a barrier designed to prevent opportunities for abuse and protects adult leaders from false allegations of misconduct.

Respect of Privacy

Adult leaders must respect the privacy of explorers and they must protect their own privacy as well. This is particularly true for situations where explorers may be changing clothes or taking showers.

Separate Accommodations

When camping or participating in an overnight trip, no youth is allowed to sleep in the same tent or room as an adult advisor other than their parent or guardian. Further, none of the explorers may share accommodations with another explorer

who is of the opposite sex.

No Secret Organizations

There are no secret organizations allowed and all aspects of the explorer program are open to observation by parents, leaders and other police supervisors. Secret organizations or other subsets of the explorer program only tends separate the explorers as a group and it creates the opportunity for abuse. All explorer activities should be open to all qualified explorers and should be transparent for review by parents and law enforcement supervision at all times.

Appropriate Attire

Police departments seek an image that projects professionalism, competence, customer service orientation and that properly reflects an efficient, orderly, and professionally operated organization. Explorers are expected to dress in a manner that is not offensive to others, is not revealing, and does not cause a distraction in the policing environment. Explorers should be dressed in their uniform or other professional attire while participating in the explorer program. Explorers are expected to present a clean and neat appearance and dress in a way that shows good judgment, common sense and maturity. By demanding strict adherence to an appropriate dress code, police departments create an atmosphere that reflects the seriousness of the purpose of exploring and prepares the explorers for future roles in the professional workplace.

Constructive Discipline

Discipline in the explorer program should be constructive and reflect the program's underlying values. Corporal punishment is never permitted.

Covert Operations

It may be tempting for police departments to seek explorers to engage in some covert operations that seemingly offer little risk to the explorer such as an operation to determine if a grocery store clerk is selling cigarettes or alcohol to underage minors. However, explorers are prohibited from directly or indirectly engaging in undercover activities and they should not be used as a confidential informant or a source of information. These activities present an unacceptable level of risk to the explorer and are inconsistent with the career education and objectives of the explorer program.

Hazing is Prohibited

Hazing is a term used to describe various rituals or other activities involving harassment, verbal abuse, threats or implied threats or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group such as the explorer program. Although violent or harassing hazing might be obvious even subtle hazing cannot be condoned. Subtle hazing typically involves activities that breach reasonable standards of mutual

respect and place new explorers on the receiving end of ridicule, embarrassment or other tactics designed to humiliate where the explorer may feel the need to endure the mistreatment to become part of the explorer program. All hazing should be prohibited as it only serves to victimize the subject explorer, it is contrary of the values of the explorer program and it harms the professionalism of law enforcement.

Safety Rule of Four

An important part of the exploring experience is the opportunity to participate in outings or overnight trips. These outings present challenges to maintain the safety of the explorers and the advisors and the "rule of four" was developed to address these concerns. The "rule of four" requires that no fewer than four individuals that include a minimum of two adults go on any overnight or extended outing. Factors such as the size of skill level of the group, the anticipated environmental conditions, and the activities that the explorers will be involved in may increase the need for additional adult advisors.

If the explorers will be staying overnight, separate accommodations are required for males and females and explorers are not allowed to share sleeping facilities with adults, other than their parents.

Fraternization

Fraternization or developing a close personal relationship such as dating between an adult leader and an explorer is prohibited. If the explorer is underage, this type of relationship may be unlawful and would certainly violate moral and professional standards of conduct that should subject both the explorer and the advisor to severe disciplinary action including termination.

Because some explorer programs allow explorers to remain in the Post until they are 21 years old, fraternization rules are necessary to maintain the department's image and morale, to maintain organizational integrity and its ability to achieve operational goals without being subjected to the negative issues that these relationships may present including allegations of workplace harassment. The concern of relationships between employees and explorers is so great that many agencies set a maximum age for their explorer program at 18 years old to avoid these concerns.

Ride-Alongs

The purpose of the explorer program is to provide comprehensive training, competition, service, practical, and recreational experience for young adults interested in a career in law enforcement or a related field. The ride-along program serves the goal of exploring by offering qualified explorers the opportunity to accompany a police officer on patrol to observe and gain practical experience with regard to the methods and techniques used in patrol operations. Ride-alongs allow the explorer to gain a better understanding of the importance and duties

of a police officer.

Although the ride-along program offers explorers a tremendous learning opportunity, there are potential risks to the explorer that include personal injury and the possible involvement in a dangerous situation therefore strict rules should be applied to minimize the potential risks.

Prior to being designated as qualified for the ride-along program, explorers will receive specialized training in methods and techniques used in patrol operations and related services, traffic control, crowd control, telecommunications procedures, basic first aid/CPR, and youth protection issues. The youth protection issues portion of the training will emphasize assertive and practical ways in which an explorer can prevent and stop inappropriate behavior from adults or other explorers. Explorers also will be provided with familiarization training on all patrol vehicle systems and equipment.

To minimize the risk of abuse explorers may not participate in ride-alongs between midnight and 6 a.m. Further, explorers shall not participate in more than two ride-alongs per month. The restriction of the time and quantity of ride-alongs are specifically designed to prevent close relationships that may result in abusive activities.

Explorers may not carry any offensive or defensive weapons; to include firearms, tasers, nightsticks, batons (collapsible or otherwise), saps, sap gloves, tactical flashlights (i.e., large metal or other heavy duty flashlights that may be used as a nightstick or baton), and knives with blades in excess of four inches, chemical repellents or electrical shock devices.

Patrol operations and calls for service often involve spontaneous situations that require an aggressive and risk inherent response; or just as likely a routine call for service escalates into a situation requiring the same type of response. In that it is not possible to foresee every possible contingency for explorers participating in the ride-along program the supervising law enforcement officer responsible for the explorer must, based upon the circumstances presented, use his/her best professional judgment with respect to the safety and security of the explorer. As a general rule, if the supervising officer is confronted with such a situation and able, he/she should make arrangements for another law enforcement officer to transport the explorer to the police station or other safe location. In some situations it may be safer for the explorer to remain in the patrol vehicle. It is the responsibility of the explorer to remain as uninvolved as possible during a spontaneous emergency. In the event the supervising officer is in need of emergency assistance, the explorer will contact the police dispatch center by police radio or cell phone and relate as clearly as possible the location and situation. If the explorer's safety is in jeopardy, and he/she can be of no further assistance to the supervising officer or other law enforcement personnel, the explorer should remove himself/herself from the immediate area and, without unnecessary delay, report to the police station.

In order for an officer to be considered for the program they must have completed their field training program and probationary period, and be in good standing with

no pending disciplinary actions or other adverse matters. Personnel approved for participation in the ride-along program must undergo an orientation that includes an overview of law enforcement exploring, agency policy and standard operating procedures for officers and explorers, and youth protection issues. Officers must also undergo the self-guided youth protection training course for adults.

Post Advisors

The post advisor fulfills the leadership role for the agencies police explorer post. As the primary adult leader for the post, the advisor is responsible to oversee all post activities and to ensure that all of the department's explorer policies are followed. Because post advisors and associate advisors have such close contact with the explorers, police chiefs need to screen candidates for these positions with the utmost care. Police chiefs should personally interview candidates for these positions and should emphasize their concern for the safety of the explorers, that any inappropriate sexual activity will not be tolerated and will result in severe discipline.

Conclusion

Police explorer programs offer a wealth of opportunities for community youth and local law enforcement agencies. Recognizing the potential risks of harm to our youth and taking reasonable and effective steps to protect the explorers is the responsibility of every police chief. Police chiefs need to select their very best officers for leadership roles in the explorer program and they need to ensure that all of the policy considerations discussed above are not only incorporated into their department policy, but that there are severe consequences for deviations particularly when there is a potential for abuse or harm to an individual explorer.

The policies developed by Learning For Life and outlined in this article enable police executives to be confident that their program managers and advisors are the best suited to develop young people and that the explorers will be able to thrive in a program where predictable misconduct and risks have been identified and addressed.

References

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