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Public Information Officers in Texas Public Safety Agencies.  
Civilian Verses Sworn. Which is Better?

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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the world of instant news, 24-hour news channels, the Internet, talk radio and other forms of modern mass media coverage; public safety agencies are forced to deal with the demands made by the media. They react by dedicating resources, human and financial, in dealing with the insatiable appetite of the media for information and news. Agencies also have to deal with the fact that they must, in addition to feeding the always-hungry media machine, manage their high profile public images if they are to retain the trust and confidence of the public that they serve, the public that supports their very existence.

The days of throwing up crime scene tape and chasing away reporters are long gone. The media is a player that must be dealt with in a fair, impartial and professional manner by all public safety agencies. Often the individual representing the police department, sheriffs department or fire department and dealing with the reporters on the streets, out in the trenches of a crime scene or major event is the Public Information Officer or P.I.O.

What is the current situation of public safety agencies in Texas when it comes to having and using P.I.O. 's? Which is better able to serve the needs of an agency? Does a sworn police officer, firefighter or sheriffs' deputy work best in representing a department, or is an individual with mass media, communications or journalism experience the way to go?

What are agencies in Texas doing? Over 130 police, sheriffs, fire and public safety agencies of various sizes were surveyed. These agencies use several means of delivering information to the public. This research was conducted to provide a snap shot of the current state of the Public Information Officer's role with the public safety community. This study details those results.

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## **Introduction**

The need for dedicated and specially trained Public Information Officers (PIO' s) in police departments, sheriffs departments and fire departments has become an accepted concept to most progressive public safety administrators. The research in this document will look at the current status of public safety PIO' s in the state of Texas. In addition, an attempt will be made to shed some light on a somewhat emotional question that, very early on in the setup process, must be answered. That question is, when implementing a PIO program, should the public safety agency select and train one of their own; a law enforcement officer or firefighter to act as their PIO? Or should agencies look outside the department and select a civilian with mass communications background, journalism degree or television, radio or newspaper field experience?

The use of a specifically tasked Public Information Officer (PIO) by a public safety agency (police, sheriff or fire department) has become widespread both in Texas, and nationally. Once an agency's chief administrator decides that his or her department does in fact have a need for a dedicated, specially trained individual to operate as their (PIO), certain questions must be answered. The first question that comes up is how much will it cost to operate this position? Before that question can be answered, the decision must be made to either assign and then train an existing police officer or firefighter in Police/Media relations, or hire a civilian from outside the agency with a mass communications or journalism degree or with television, print or radio reporting.

The agency's top administration in the planning stage of the process can directly answer the question of the affect on operating costs and operating philosophy of the PIO.

On its face, the question looks fairly straightforward and simple. Is assigning and training a police officer or firefighter to the PIO role effective, or would it be more effective to go outside of the agency and hire a civilian with a media related degree or background? How are other public safety agencies in Texas managing this task?

Where the difficulty arises is in attempting to answer the question of what makes a PIO effective and how to measure that effectiveness. The survey conducted as part of this research will be of value to those having to make this determination. It provides a snap shot of current practices being used by public safety agencies in Texas of various sizes.

To help answer this question of civilian verses sworn the individuals already doing the job of PIO were interviewed. Since these people are already in the trenches doing the job, it is believed their input into answering this question will be invaluable.

In order to examine the current practices in Texas, a survey was sent out to over 250 police departments, fire departments, college campus police agencies and combined public safety departments operating throughout Texas. These agencies were of various sizes. The survey was directed to the individual currently operating in the role of PIO for that department. In addition to the survey, a review of current professional literature covering this issue was conducted.

It was believed that the question of civilian verses sworn PIO would generate a significant amount of passionate debate from those with strong feelings, each having and vested interests on both sides of the issue. It was also believed the information coming back from those most knowledgeable in the field would reveal the most important factor in determining a PIO' s effectiveness is the motivation, skill, interest and experience of the person placed in that position, not their classification within the agency.

Whether an agency places a sworn law enforcement officer or firefighter into the PIO role, or goes outside the agency and hires a civilian with media or mass communications experience is much less important than screening for and making every effort possible to get the right person in the right role. This is true for most job assignments, but is especially important for the highly visible, potentially powerful and, potentially damaging position of PIO.

The implications of this research are important to any police chief, fire chief, sheriff or director of public safety that may be considering implementing a PIO position within their agency. An agency that places the wrong individual into the PIO role runs the risk of serious public relations damage and public image problems. The PIO is the face of that agency, whether that PIO is sworn or civilian, the agency head, or a member of the rank and file, this individuals' impact on the agencies public image will be significant.

When things go right the PIO is center stage, up front representing their agency to the cameras and in turn the public. When things go wrong, that same PIO is again, center stage dealing with a hostile and cynical media and public. A poorly trained or poorly functioning PIO can seriously damage an agency's relationship with both the local media and the local community served by that agency. An effective PIO, regardless of classification can act as a powerful force multiplier in generating high levels of positive public relations and good will. An ineffective PIO, one that is not able to sell his or her department to the local media and the community runs the risk of completely counteracting any positive public relations programs currently operated by the law enforcement or fire agency, even if these programs are producing significant positive results. Such is the power of the PIO position.

It is believed that this research will not only assist public safety administrators in seeing how other agencies in Texas are handling the PIO role, but will also show how the principal of

putting the right person in the right position is of much more importance than the debate over whether an agency's PIO is classified as sworn or civilian.

### **Review of Literature**

The use of specifically tasked PIO's by law enforcement agencies and fire service is not a new phenomenon. What is interesting is the fact that many medium and small size agencies in Texas now have dedicated PIO's in place. Almost all agencies, with or without an assigned PIO have policies in place specifically addressing who in the organization is authorized to speak to media representatives. Having such policies in place is a necessity in today media saturated world.

Sparks (2000) suggests that modern law enforcement agencies can rival Fortune 500 corporations in their complexity, use of technology and value to their communities. Because of this they can quickly become the focus of media attention from around the world when a crisis or major event occurs.

Any department head considering creating such a position cannot underestimate the power of the PIO position and its ability to help or harm an agency. The selection of the PIO should be carefully made at the highest levels of the organization. To do less is to run the risk of seeing news stories such as this article by Daniel Perry (McAllen Monitor July 9, 2002).

"McAllen - Former McAllen PIO Police Department Public Information Officer Mitch Reintiz is serving a 10-day suspension for using departmental computer equipment to send a woman unwanted nude photographs of himself via the Internet."

Before selecting a PIO, it might be valuable to have a working definition of the role of a PIO in a public safety agency. Melissa Motschall defines a PIO as "The essence of the PIO position is managing an agency's image, which requires nurturing relationships with multiple audiences and performing a variety of communication tasks." (Motschall, 2001)

Ms. Motschall's article, based on a survey conducted in 2000, showed that writing press releases, making formal contact with the media, making informal contact with the media and holding press conferences were the top four activities conducted by the PIO's responding to the survey.

When an agency sets out to create a PIO position, two questions are posed. The first is who will get the job? That question is followed by should a civilian from outside of the department be assigned the duties and responsibilities of PIO?

Sworn or civilian was exactly the question asked by Dr. Haven Simmons of Salisbury State University, Salisbury Maryland of participants to the National Information Officers Association Training Conference held in August of 1999. Dr. Havens' findings were published in the March-April 2000 issue of NIOA News.

Dr. Haven (2000) surveyed 93 PIO's attending the NIOA training seminar. These men and women represented police and fire departments from across the United States. Of the 93 PIO's questioned, 62 or more than two thirds were sworn police or fire personnel. For the law enforcement agencies, the sworn PIO's most often came from patrol, administration and criminal investigations in that order. The respondents in this survey disagreed strongly amongst themselves on the question of which is superior, a sworn or a civilian PIO. The sworn personnel overwhelming agreed with the statement that sworn personnel are superior in the role because of



presumed loyalty, dedication and knowledge of the agency's professional procedures and polices, while the non-sworn personnel disagreed slightly with that statement.

### **Methodology**

What is the status of PIO 's in Texas? Which is better suited to operate in the PIO position, a sworn law enforcement officer or fire fighter, or a civilian employee with mass media, communications or a journalism background and experience?

It was this researcher's belief going into this project that the sworn verses civilian question as it relates to selecting a PIO was going to end up being less important than the simple need to carefully select an individual who is motivated, interested, articulate and has the desire to do the job. Along with wanting to do the job, the individual must have the right mix of people skills, be willing and able to work closely with the agency's top administrators, be able to work with a minimum amount of direct, close supervision and be able to present a professional, confident and steady public image to the media.

In order to get a feel for how agencies in Texas were dealing with this issue, an eight question survey was sent out to 263 police departments, sheriffs departments, fire departments, college campus police and combined public safety agencies. The survey was directed to the individual within the agency who was currently responsible for dealing with the media on a day to-day basis. Five of the eight questions asked respondents to rate on a scale of one to five their level of agreement or disagreement to a particular statement. An answer of one was a strongly disagree response, an answer of five indicating that the respondent strongly agreed with the statement.

The last two questions asked the respondents to prioritize the most important types of knowledge that a PIO should have in order to be effective, and to place in order the functions

they most often performed as a PIO. The complete survey is available as appendix A of this document.

The survey was sent to a wide variety of public safety agencies within Texas. These agencies ranged in size from small, service population of 2,650, to agencies serving populations of over one million. Of the 263 survey instruments sent out, 136, or 48.29% were returned. The numeric results were entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed.

### **Findings**

Of the 263 agencies surveyed, 136 or over 48% responded. Police departments made up the majority of the responding agencies, with 77, or 55.15% of the 136 responses. 49 responses (34.56%) were received from fire departments and 4 combined public safety agencies (2.94%) responded. One sheriff's department and two campus police agencies also replied.

Of the responding agencies, 79.41 % of the agencies used a sworn police officer or fire fighters as their assigned PIO. 14 of the respondents (9.56%) used civilians in the PIO role. Two agencies had a single PIO serving as both the police departments and fire departments' PIO.

The first survey question examined the issue of sworn versus civilian controversy. That question stated, "With training a sworn member of the department (verses a non-sworn member) can more effectively perform the duties associated with those of a Public Information Officer." Almost 40% of the respondents answered this question with the highest rating possible on the scale, a five, or strongly agree. 32% answered with a rating of four. Putting it another way, 72% of the respondents came down on the side of believing that sworn was better. 18% of the respondents answered with a rating of three. Of the 14 civilian PIO' s responding, six answered this question with a rating of two or less. This response would indicate that the sworn personnel

currently holding down PIO positions in their agencies strongly believe that having a police officer, deputy or firefighter in the role is most effective.

The second question related to what a PIO needs in the way of support from the top administrators in order to be able to do his or her job. That question was "...the most important thing that an effective PIO needs is the full support, cooperation and confidence of the agencies top administrator..." Regardless of the PIO's classification, the respondents overwhelmingly felt that this statement was true. Over 74% responded with a rating of five, with another 20% answering with a four rating. This question and its response highlight how the responding PIO's feel about the working relationship that must be present between the agency head and the PIO serving that agency. A PIO must be able to have free and easy access to the agency's top administrators in order to be able to effectively perform his or her duties. Top administrators examining the ranks for a PIO candidate may want to seriously consider their own personal ability to work closely with any individual selected for this position.

Can a non-sworn PIO gain the same level of acceptance and trust from rank and file law enforcement and fire personnel as a sworn police or fire PIO? This was question three in the survey. The response to this question was rather interesting. Question one significantly supported that the respondents felt sworn was better, the answers coming back on this question were not so clear-cut. Only 10.29% strongly agreed with this statement and gave it a rating of five. 20.59% answered with a rating of four. 25.74% came down right in the middle with a three rating, and 29.41 % gave a rating of two. 11.76% strongly disagreed with this statement. On this particular question, feelings were not so well defined.

Question four of the survey asked if a sworn PIO coming up from the ranks of an agency and being given some media relations training could be just as effective as a civilian PIO with a

formal journalism, communications or mass media degree or background. The responses to this question were again more in line with what one would expect from respondents, the majority of whom were sworn personnel. Over 80% of the respondents answered this question with four or five rating, 42.65% giving it a five, strongly agreeing.

One argument at times used by non-sworn PIO's is that the media representatives themselves prefer to deal with a civilian PIO who was once one of their own. Question five addressed this thought and asked "Media representatives would prefer to deal with a non-sworn PIO with a mass media or journalistic background to a sworn officer or firefighter PIO." Only about 11 % of the respondents answered this question with a four or five. Approximately 56% answered this question with a one or two rating, with slightly over 28% landing in the middle of the road and giving a three rating. This implies that a majority of the respondents feel that the media representatives themselves prefer to deal with a sworn officer or firefighter.

Question six of the survey stated "The individual's personal motivation and interest in the position are more important than their classification (sworn vs. non-sworn) when it comes to determining an employee's effectiveness or success as a P.I.O." Well over two-thirds (69.11 %) of the respondents answered this question with a rating of either four or five. 22.79% gave a three rating, with less than 6% answering with a one or two. Clearly the majority of the PIO's responding to the survey felt that to be an effective PIO the individual selected needed to be enthusiastic about being assigned or selected for the position.

When asked about the skills and areas of knowledge that were most valuable for a PIO to possess, knowledge or ability in the area of public speaking, and knowledge of department rules, regulations and policies were tied for the top spot and were both considered to be very important skills. Knowledge of state penal codes, traffic codes and local ordinances, knowledge of media

procedures and knowledge of local community and political issues followed in that order and were rated significantly lower on the skills listing.

The final survey question asked about the functions most frequently performed by the PIO' s in Texas. The survey results indicated that the function most frequently performed by Texas PIO' s is conducting face-to-face interviews with reporters when major crimes or events take place within the community. After conducting interviews, the responding PIO' s expend a great deal of time and effort in producing written press releases on significant events and in getting these releases distributed to the various media representatives that they deal with. The least often performed function for PIO' s was the setting up and coordinating press conferences for the agency's top administrator (i.e. the chief), where the chief is being interviewed.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to take a broad look at the current status of public safety PIO' s in the state of Texas. Also an attempt has been made to shed some light on answering the somewhat emotional question of who should be a PIO. When implementing a PIO program, should a public safety agency select and train one of their own, that is a law enforcement officer or firefighter to act as their PIO, or should they look outside the department and select a civilian with a mass communications background, journalism degree or television, radio or newspaper field experience?

It was believed that the question of sworn verses civilian PIO would generate a significant amount of debate from those with strong feelings and with vested interests on both sides of the issue. It was also believed the research would reveal the most important factor in determining a PIO' s effectiveness is the motivation, skill, interest and experience of the person placed in that position, not their classification within the agency.

The survey results provided a good picture of the current status of public safety PIO's scattered throughout Texas that work in various size, and types of departments. Although 72% of the respondents felt that a sworn PIO was better able to represent a public safety agency, the reader must keep in mind the majority of those individuals responding to the survey (79.41 %) were themselves sworn law enforcement officers or firefighters. What PIO's felt was more important to their effectiveness than being sworn or civilian was the level of support they receive from the head of the agency they represent.

Not only was support of the chief important, but also having easy access to the chief was very important in the minds of the respondents if they were to be effective in doing their jobs.

The majority of the respondents seemed to agree with this researchers' hypothesis that selecting an individual who is motivated, able to work independently, interested in the position, and has the ability to work closely with the agency's top administrators are more important than whether the PIO is sworn or a civilian.

It is hoped that this research will be of use to police chiefs, sheriffs, fire chiefs and public safety directors who may be considering the formation of a dedicated PIO position within their agency. It is also hoped the information provided in this report will help those top administrator in agencies that already have and use PIO's gauge how their PIO program stacks up against others operating in Texas.

## References

Sparks, Ancil B. (December 2000). Fine Tuning Your News Briefing. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 69(12), 22-24.

Perry, Daniel (2002). Former McAllen PIO suspended for misuse of equipment. The Monitor. July 9, 2002.

Motschall, Melissa (November-December 2001). And the survey says... NIOA News, 1( 19), 1.

Simmons, Haven (March-April 2000). Sworn or Civilian? NIOA News, 1(9), 1.

## Appendix A

### PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER SURVEY

The information collected in this survey will be used strictly for research purposes. No agency or individual will be identified in the final survey results report.

#### I. Agency details.

A. Agency's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

B. Agency Type: -Police Dept. -Sheriffs Dept. -Fire Dept.  
- Campus/College Police Dept. - Public Safety Dept.

C. Approximate service population: \_\_\_\_\_

D. Number of sworn officers or deputies: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of firefighters/medical personnel (if appropriate): \_\_\_\_\_

E. Classification of Public Information Officer:

- Sworn law enforcement officer or firefighter.
- Civilian employee of Police, Sheriff, Fire or Public Safety Dept.

F. Number of total P.I.O' s working for your agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of sworn personnel working exclusively as P.I.O.' s: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of non-sworn personnel working exclusively as P.I O. ' s: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of sworn personnel working as P.I O's but also with other duties: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of non-sworn personnel working as P.I O's but also with other duties: \_\_\_\_\_

G. Primary (senior or lead) Public Information Officer's contact information.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: (\_\_\_\_)\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

H. Name, title and position of individual completing this survey:

\_\_\_\_\_



## II. Survey Questions

Please rate your answers from 1 through 5. An answer of 1 denotes strong disagreement while a 5 denotes strong agreement.

1. With training, a sworn member of the department (verses a non-sworn member) can more effectively perform the duties associated with those of a Public Information Officer.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

2. Regardless of the P.I.O's classification, the **most important** thing that an effective P.I.O. needs is the full support, cooperation and confidence of the agencies top administrator (Police Chief, Fire Chief, Sheriff).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

3. A non-sworn P.I.O. can gain the same level of acceptance and trust from rank and file law enforcement and fire personnel as a sworn police or fire P.I.O.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

4. A sworn P.I.O. who comes up through the ranks of the agency, and with some media relations training can be just as effective as a civilian P.I.O. with a formal journalism, communications or mass media degree or background.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

5. Media representatives would prefer to deal with a non-sworn P.I.O. with a mass media or journalistic background to a sworn officer or firefighter P.I.O.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

6. The individual's personal motivation and interest in the position are more important than their classification (sworn vs. non-sworn) when it comes to determining an employee's effectiveness or success as a P.I.O.

Strongly 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly  
Disagree Agree

7. A P.I.O. needs a varied knowledge base in order to be able to perform his or her duties. Please rate the following areas of knowledge on a 1 - 5 scale. A 5 represents the most important knowledge area and a 1, least important

Knowledge or ability in the area of public speaking  
 Knowledge of department rules, regulations and policies.....  
 Knowledge of state penal codes, traffic codes and local ordinances.....  
 Knowledge of media (T.V., radio, newspaper) procedures.....  
 Knowledge of local community and political issues .....

8. Please list the P.I.O. functions that you perform most often for your agency. A rating of 5 is the most often performed function, a 1 the least often performed.

\_\_\_\_\_ On a regular basis conduct interviews with media representatives (on camera, taped radio interviews, face to face with print reporters) on crimes or incidents of interest to the media.

\_\_\_\_\_ Set up and coordinate press conferences for your agency's top administrators (Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs, Sheriff, Director, etc.), where the media actually interviews them.

\_\_\_\_\_ Produce written press releases on significant events for distribution to media outlets.

\_\_\_\_\_ Provide background or statistical information to media representatives when requested.

\_\_\_\_\_ Field emails, calls or other inquires from the general public requesting specific information on crimes or other events of interest to them.

Please mail completed surveys to: Sgt. Dean Poos  
 Rowlett Police Dept.  
 P.O.B.370  
 Rowlett, TX. 75030-0370

Questions or comments may be emailed to [dpoos@ci.rowlett.tx.us](mailto:dpoos@ci.rowlett.tx.us)