The Challenge – Backlog

Like many police departments, problems in the Records Bureau plagued the El Monte California Police Department. An extensive backlog of reports pending review was the most pressing issue, but other risks were pervasive as well.

Without performance indicators, accountability was absent, while problems with organizational structure, work schedules, and training concerns all compounded the difficulties. Combined, these impeded the timeliness of investigations, the identification of suspects and crime trends, and the ability of officers to access accurate real-time information.

In 2016, the department implemented the Spillman Records Management System (RMS), but "no one in department had a great feel for the product." The lack of a Records Manager for the last 12 years, coupled with a lack of sufficient training in the RMS, resulted in records employees feeling they were "always struggling to meet state requirements."

A new supervisor had just been appointed and recognized that he, and the department, needed help.

The new commander felt of utmost importance was finding someone that could help convince the City Council that the Records Manager position needed to be added to the upcoming budget. Believing a new Records Manager, stronger leadership, and more staff was the right answer to resolving the challenges, the department contacted PRI.

A Deeper Look

There were seven full-time records employees, as well as a records supervisor, but no manager. The Dispatch Manager had taken on multiple duties normally assigned to Records, including acting as the Custodian of Records, the RMS system administrator, and the NIBRS program manager.

Looking deeper into the issues, PRI learned it was more than just staffing that was cause for concern. The framework within which Records personnel operated at a process and structural level, needed an overhaul. Employees needed a better understanding of their role in law enforcement information management, being much more than just managing records, including the responsibility of producing timely and actionable crime information for law enforcement operations.

The Issues

PRI identified that a lack of guidance and standardized process in the management of information throughout the records lifecycle contributed to the significant backlog of reports.

Personnel indicated there was "no focus on clearing the backlog". Indeed, despite the urgency of delayed criminal records, there was no defined plan or strategy for resolving or preventing it from happening in the future. Policies governing report submission and review were not being followed. Records personnel felt frustrated and held the belief that sworn personnel were not being held accountable to producing accurate, error-free, well-written reports, or for submitting reports on time. These issues contributed to a general malaise that had overtaken the unit. The operation had turned toxic.

Intangible causal factors, including a lack of leadership, supervision, accountability, and trust, all contributed to a very apparent low morale. Employees in Records felt work was unevenly assigned. In fact, the lack of organizational structure led to work being assigned to individuals rather than to positions.
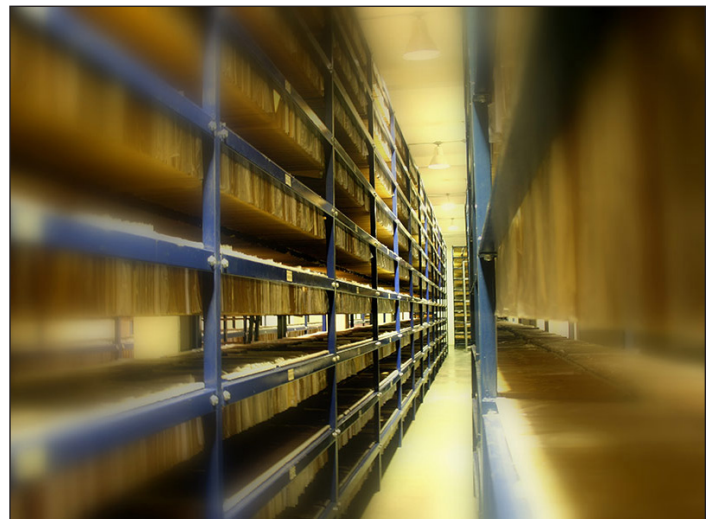
Clearly defined roles, in combination with an organizational structure enabling the efficient management of work were lacking. No formalized operational structure allowing for the consistent assignment and completion of work tasks existed. Furthermore, the unit was operating 7-days a week unnecessarily.

Duplication of process was prevalent. Approaches to records management were antiquated and personnel relied too heavily on printing and filing multiple copies of paperwork. Records personnel acknowledged they regularly printed and filed copies of documents even after they were scanned into the RMS.

One employee described how the agency was "in the habit of printing and stamping everything."

The Plan

The team at PRI worked to confirm the root cause of the issues at hand. Together, in multiple collaborative exercises, PRI and the records staff developed a comprehensive list of work tasks. This list established exactly what records personnel were doing each day. The task list, along with numerous interviews, and job task analysis sessions, helped PRI develop an understanding of the environment within the records unit, and a plan to modernize, streamline, and correctly staff it.

PRI conducted a comprehensive needs assessment including a staffing study, business process analysis, and technology inventory. Our risk assessment identified an extremely high level of discord between the records unit and communications, which led to a lack of accountability. We also identified processes that were duplicative and unnecessary, work roles inadequately assigned, scheduling that was stretching limited human resources, and an overall lack of training.

A Complete Success

PRI developed an alternative work schedule, revised quality control procedures, position-based work assignments, updated and revised processes, and suggested staffing revisions. These suggestions helped guide the operation to focus on forward thinking, systematic change, designed to increase performance, efficiency, and information accuracy.

While resistance to change is widespread among the law enforcement profession, the El Monte Police Department embraced the changes recommended by PRI. Goals, objectives, and long-term strategies within the records unit were created and now provide guidance for tasks which need to be completed daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Within two months, the backlog in Records had been reduced by 50%.

The department's ability and willingness to follow certain fundamental concepts in the field of police records, and to follow the recommended changes led to a successful turnaround.

We are proud to say that the El Monte Police Department is moving in the right direction and on a path of serving as a model of information management excellence.

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> — El Monte PD Employee