



RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The [Center for Justice Research and Innovation](#) led an internally funded initiative at CNA from October 2020 to September 2021 and conducted case studies of six agencies' Field Training Officer (FTO) programs. During this assessment, CNA examined common practices and policies that law enforcement agencies use within their field training, such as the qualifications an officer must have to become an FTO, and we assessed the quality and effectiveness of communication between trainers and trainees. In this resource, we identify several considerations and recommendations for agencies to develop, implement, and sustain their FTO programs with regards to recruiting FTOs and retaining those who demonstrate the ability to be successful and impactful trainers.

From the inception of American policing, recruiting the optimal number of officers to meet the needs and expectations of communities and agencies, along with retaining those officers, has been a challenging endeavor. The challenges with recruitment and retention appear to be even more significant of late, given the calls for transparency and accountability, as well as community expectations of the profession. As stated in the [Field Training Officer Impact Assessment](#),¹ recruitment and retention both affect and are affected by field training officers. FTOs will mold new officers joining the profession, and if a new officer is paired with an FTO who exhibits low morale, poor practices, or other negative qualities, this can affect the retention or quality of that new officer. Simultaneously, recruitment of officers to the FTO position is critical. Due to the notorious staffing issues facing law enforcement agencies nationwide, FTOs can be overworked and feel underappreciated, which can affect their mental health and physical safety and lead to burnout and other negative consequences.

RECRUITING FOR AN FTO PROGRAM

It is critical for an agency to establish clear criteria and processes for becoming a training officer, to articulate what qualities the agency is looking for and requires, and to communicate how the agency will ensure that these standards are met and maintained in order to achieve an optimal FTO program. Agencies should establish a requirement for new FTOs to receive specific training on becoming a field trainer, which would not only outline the expectations but also provide insights regarding what the job entails and how it adds work and potential stress to an already challenging job.

Agencies can also incentivize FTOs to participate and remain in the program by providing them with opportunities to undergo new training and utilizing them for other leadership opportunities, such as the In-Service Training Program. Also, agency leaders emphasizing the importance of the FTO program may convince other officers to join. Formal distinction of the FTOs through uniform insignia, recognition upon completion of a trainee's field training phase, and the organization of an event hosted by Command staff that highlights a successful field training year are low-cost examples that leadership can implement to assist with recruitment and retention.² Additionally, when an FTO receives a commendation or departmental award that may be unrelated to the FTO program, consider making special notation during this recognition that the officer is also a member of the FTO cadre. Positive training experiences can also incentivize recruits to become future FTOs. Some interviews with current trainees mentioned that the feeling of the agency and the field training program wanting them to succeed and their FTO treating them with respect and using an adult learning approach left them with such a positive experience that they too hope to become FTOs when eligible.

Another way agencies can recruit FTOs to serve is by providing recognition in the promotion process for an officer's successful service as an FTO. Whether or not a department decides to "require" or to strongly encourage promotional

candidates, such as for a sergeant rank, to serve as an FTO to enhance their potential for promotion may demonstrate how field trainers are informal and influential leaders.

Agencies should also look for officers with specific qualities and motivations, since positive experiences with an FTO can incentivize current trainees to become future FTOs. Several FTOs who were interviewed noted that even though some of their agencies provided incentives in the form of monetary compensation or time off, which certainly do contribute to motivation, the FTOs' primary motivations were to help not only the new recruits but also the department to do better. Many of these FTOs demonstrated a strong, passionate, and, most importantly, intrinsic motivation to be trainers with a built-in sense of responsibility. One veteran officer with more than 15 years of experience as an FTO described their motivation and pride to continue as an FTO, saying, *"If you see something that you can help to improve then don't complain... get involved and do something about it."* The FTO applied this mentality toward helping not only the trainees and other less-experienced FTOs but also the department as a whole. This quality in an FTO is not something that can easily be taught, but it should be recognized and highlighted by agency leadership when recruiting and identifying their field trainers.

RETAINING FTOS

To retain the appropriate quality and quantity of FTOs for the agency, leaders must place value on their Field Training programs and demonstrate this throughout their department. The messaging coming from the Chief or Sheriff and command staff should clearly and consistently demonstrate how FTOs are one of the most important components of the organization's success, and this should be conveyed and supported at every level of the agency. This messaging should include recognition that FTOs not only help to teach the fundamental requirements of the job to the new officers, but also shape the future leaders and direction of the organization. Establishing a cultural awareness and philosophy that values the role of the FTO starts with delivering this messaging to the recruit officers in the academy and re-enforcing this with continuous messaging throughout the organization. Emphasizing the importance of the FTO will also help to ensure officers who are taking on extra responsibilities to serve in this role are feeling appreciated. One FTO interviewed expressed how important and professionally gratifying it was for the department to recognize FTOs as subject matter experts for not just the new recruits but for the entire agency when it comes to training officers.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of the FTO program throughout the agency, another way agencies can help to retain their cadre of FTOs is by providing feedback on their performance. Several FTOs that were interviewed noted that there was little if anything in place on how the quality of their training was being evaluated and communicated to them. Every FTO interviewed welcomed getting feedback on their performance as trainers. Some former FTOs noted that the lack of feedback and quality control with the field training program influenced their desire to remain in the program. Several said that it was fairly clear that some of the agencies' training officers took on this role exclusively for the monetary incentives, and the quality of their training was sub-standard since there was no accountability for their training practices by leadership.

Establishing a formal communication process between the FTO supervisor and the FTO is critical. As one current FTO noted, *"We must have honest peer review processes for accountability from Trainers to Trainers, from Sergeants to Trainers, and even from Recruits to Trainers."* Ongoing, open communication between the Field Training supervisors and the FTOs provides an opportunity not only to learn from each other on needs and possible system improvements, but it affords the FTOs a means to be recognized, heard, and valued. This process should be done at intervals before and during field training. As with the communication and documentation procedures that FTOs provide to the recruit on their performance and areas of improvement identified, this same approach should be in place between the supervisor of the FTO program and the FTOs. This will allow FTOs to hear from the FTO supervisor about the good work that they are doing as an FTO and what practices should be sustained and promoted to the rest of the FTO cadre.

Accountability in an FTO program helps to improve the quality of the training as well as the wellness and value of the trainer cadre. Those agencies that do not have clearly articulated processes and procedures in place with their FTO programs may run the risk of losing good FTOs who may end up being utilized unfairly and inequitably. At the very least, not having an accountability measurement through feedback and documentation in place can contribute to the already existing stresses and additional work that FTOs are likely already experiencing.

An unfortunate reality is that recruiting and retaining the best available officers to be FTOs may be affected by many factors, and some agencies may not have the resources or staff available to establish specific criteria for their field training cadre. By communicating this reality, along with the associated consequences that can affect the quality of policing, to the communities they serve, police leadership can spotlight the critical need to receive additional funding to better support their field training program. As with many other aspects of police work, communication and relationship building, particularly with current and future FTOs, is essential to an effective and sustainable FTO program.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jenkins, Monique, Jessica Dockstader, Sharon Oster, Thomas Woodmansee, and Mary O'Connor. 2021. Field Training Programs in Law Enforcement. Arlington, VA: CNA. https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/field-training-programs-in-law-enforcement.pdf
- ² Oster, S. 2021. Incentives: Impacts on a Field Training Officer Program. https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/impacts-on-field-training-incentives.pdf

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