

# The Case for Citizen Police Academies in Troubled Times

BY DANIEL P. SMITH, AUTHOR OF "ON THE JOB: BEHIND THE STARS OF THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT"

I confess I knew little of Citizen Police Academies when the Westmont CPA Alumni Association invited me to present my author program at their monthly meeting in July, 2008. That night, I shared my program, detailing the personal experiences that led me to write *On the Job: Behind the Stars of the Chicago Police Department* and introducing some of the

officers I profiled in the book. Immediately I sensed this was a very different group, high on energy and engagement that immediately drove me into the world of CPAs. Today, I consider myself among the concept's most ardent advocates.

To date, I've presented my author program to over three dozen CPAs in five states and, each time, I've left more impressed, more inspired by the CPA culture and its tangible benefits. And yet, I continue wondering: why doesn't every community have a CPA?

Combined with ever-constant political maneuvering, the economy's recent turmoil has challenged many CPAs to stay afloat. A number of departments have paused their program or,



even more tragic, ceased this valuable avenue that promotes the department and fosters goodwill.

As a reality check to my emotional attachment — and perhaps yours as well — we must remember that CPAs demand two critical elements to succeed: 1) a police and civic hierarchy dedicated to proactive, inventive measures; and 2) a monetary investment, which can be a hefty obstacle given increasingly thin budgets.

Most figures I've heard cite the cost of running a CPA at \$4,000 to 5,000 with personnel standing as the most costly item. To circumvent the financial burden, some wise, CPA-valuing departments have gotten creative by adjusting instructors' work sched-

ules; bringing in qualified retirees; providing future comp time rather than overtime pay; or pursuing sponsorship and grant monies. While budgetary woes are a convenient and easy excuse to disregard the CPA, clever thinking can put a dent in costs and create a viable CPA; and yet, too few departments pursue maintaining CPA life.

While manpower and safety should always be a

department's paramount concerns, few police programs can match a CPA's dollar-for-dollar return on investment.

At my various encounters with CPA classes and alumni groups, I've often asked audience members to raise their hands if their perception of the police has changed as a result of taking the CPA course. Nearly every hand rises. I then ask if their perception of police has changed in a positive way. Again, nearly every hand rises. Folks, that's positive perception and a return on investment that any corporate heavyweight — McDonald's or Apple, Nike or Ford — would die for.

CPAs stand among the most viable, critical, and robust programs a department can offer, and yet, we're seeing

dwindling numbers, and far too many departments ignoring the powerful impact these initiatives can have.

### **CPAs assume control of perception while dispelling common myths**

So much of what the public knows of police comes from either direct interaction, often not at an individual's finest hour, or the media, both of which can deliver a narrow or distorted view of police officers and their work.

Rather than letting Hollywood or disenchanted citizens shape civilian perceptions of the police department, CPAs offer departments the ability to shape their own public image by opening the avenues of communication in a casual, open-minded atmosphere. Any PR guru will tell you this is a fundamental means to turn public opinion in your favor.

Furthermore, students learn about their department's roles and capabilities, which will help reduce non-police calls, create more informed citizens, and provide officers a more efficient use of their time.

### **CPAs foster collaboration and empathy**

Insightful, involved dialogue dominates the academy classes, which serve to humanize the department and provide individual officers a name and voice in the midst of cultivating personal relationships. Cops are not seen as a uniform, but as part of the community's fabric, while citizens begin to consider their own responsibilities.

### **CPAs build a foundation of support and volunteerism**

Each year, CPA alums in South Bend, Indiana hand city leaders a symbolic check signifying the "value added" alumni members have donated to the city through various volunteer efforts. That check amount, annually accounting for over 10,000 hours of service, hovers near \$200,000.

Alumni groups, where these CPAs yield the greatest benefits, often hold fundraising drives for unbudgeted items, such as ear pieces, seat organizers, equipment, and training. In many cases, alums serve as role players in training scenarios or as a responsible presence at community events, such as parades and festivals. Anchorage, Alaska has used its alumni to place follow-up phone calls to victims alerting them of their case status, a savvy PR move that reminds victims they haven't been tossed aside.

This spirit of volunteerism and support creates a stronger department and delivers tangible, even cost-saving benefits for the community and its officers.

### **CPAs generate networking opportunities**

Every community is filled with talented and eager souls. I know departments that have utilized — often free of charge — CPA members or graduates for computer graphics, the department newsletter, or even funeral escorts. In Arlington Heights, two students owning a local McDonald's restaurant have regularly volunteered product and support for various police functions. One member of the Arlington Heights alumni group is a criminal justice professor at Loyola University who had his students collect and examine data from 1,000 community surveys distributed by the department.

The CPA's presence introduces the department to valuable people, resources, and relationships that would otherwise go undiscovered.

### **CPAs jolt professionalism and morale among the ranks**

Police work can be a thankless job and one that weighs on the soul while inviting disenchantment and cynicism. Countless CPA instructors have told me of the joy they receive from citizens showing a sincere interest in their work. The CPAs

allow officers themselves to see their community's citizens in a new light while simultaneously providing a renewed sense of professionalism as they explain their work to others and emerge a credible and trusted source of information. All police should be so fortunate to be reminded of the valuable, important work they do.

### **Ultimately, CPAs help produce a stronger community**

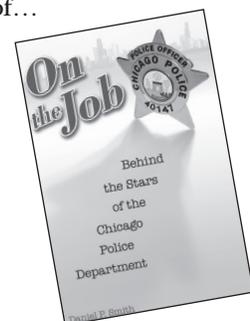
As departments across the nation face budget and manpower crunches, citizen support gains added importance. If citizens can lend their eyes and ears to assist law enforcement efforts, crime can fall as community spirit rises.

In the end, CPAs create more informed, more empathetic citizens, all of which leads to a stronger community and safer working environment for police. With training and bearing in hand, citizens now have a better understanding of how to report crimes and, perhaps more importantly, how to not be a victim, a giant step in creating a more efficient police department. ❖



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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