

Starting Up A Citizens Police Academy

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The First

Citizens Police Academy

In 1985, the Orlando, Florida Police Department adopted the concept of the Police Night School for their agency, and created the first Citizens Police Academy in the United States. The ultimate goal of the Orlando Citizens Police Academy was to reduce crime through a stronger citizen commitment to the police department and the community. Success was instantaneous, and a new law enforcement tool was found.

Word of the success spread and, in that same year, Missouri City, Texas joined in and adopted the same concept. Today, you will find citizens police academy programs throughout the United States in communities large and small, providing police departments and sheriff's offices with the opportunity to describe law enforcement the way it really is... not the television version, but their own local, real-life version of how they go about doing their job.

■ **The Basics.** The role of police has always been of interest to the average citizen. The television media has capitalized upon this curiosity with shows such as "Cops," "America's Most Wanted," and "Stories of the Highway Patrol." Each week, real police action is broadcast into the living rooms of mil-

The concept of the Citizens Police Academy (CPA) actually started in the United Kingdom in 1977. It began in the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, England. A police night school was implemented to allow citizens, who were anxious to learn about police functions, police operations, and the organization of the police system in England. The founders received an immediate response from the public. They were soon overwhelmed with applicants wanting to know about "their" police force. The project was so successful that it was permanently adopted as part of an ongoing police public relations program.

lions of Americans. Numerous police agencies have also benefitted from the curiosity that citizens have about the police by forming citizens police academy programs that create an expansion of their community-based efforts. These programs are intended to open the lines of communication between the community and the police department. Generally, the relationship between the police and the citizen is one of "love-hate." To the citizen, it may frequently appear that the police are not doing their job or they are exceeding their boundaries. By allowing citizens a first-hand look at what rules, regulations, and policies the police follow, some of the misunderstandings may be alleviated. The objective of a citizens police academy is not to train an individual to be a reserve police officer, but to produce informed citizens. The citizens and police officers meet each other face-to-face in a neutral, friendly setting, and each becomes a person to the other. In the past, citizens have simply seen a uniform; CPA programs provide them with an understanding about the person behind the badge.

■ **Choosing a Coordinator.** Some law enforcement agencies choose to have a sworn officer in the role of coordinator; others choose to have a civilian coordinator on staff to handle the program. Should your coordinator be an officer/deputy? Detective? Community services officer? Civilian? Who? Chances are you already have a candidate in mind for this position. The rank of your coordinator does not matter as long as the person chosen to do the job is driven, and

understands the goals and benefits of conducting the citizens police academy, which includes better communication between citizens and law enforcement, creating citizens who are willing to "get involved" after graduation, and developing your officers/deputies through an introduction to teaching. It's a win-win situation all the way around.

Your Coordinator will be the glue that holds the entire program together. The Coordinator attends each and every class, and coordinates the program overall... start to finish. They will also be the one "constant" in the lives of your participants during the weeks they are attending the citizens police academy, because this is generally the individual setting up the refreshments for the evening, checking that the audiovisual equipment is working, and introducing the instructors each evening. The actual class presentations are conducted by various officers and/or outside speakers depending on their specialties and the class topic. Generally, two topics are covered each night, with a break in between.

■ **Course Outline.** To produce your course outline, you must first decide what is important to present to a diverse group of local residents. What is your goal? What do you want to accomplish with the Citizens Police Academy? Certainly one goal is to educate the participants. You not only want them to know what you do on a daily basis, but also why you do what you do, and how you do it. Instructors should share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences because it will promote better understanding, and the officers will become "human" in the eyes of the citizens. Participants truly do enjoy hearing a few "war stories" in the various classes. You should also expect to hear how the participants feel about law enforcement and the community.

Generally, the very first class consists of a welcome by the chief of police and introductions (by both the law enforcement agency as well as the participants), followed by a tour of the facility (if the class is being conducted within the police department or sheriff's office). The very last class is usually the graduation... more on this later.

Some suggested topics to include in the other weeks of your Citizens Police Academy are:

- Officer Testing/Hiring
- Department Structure
- Department Weapons and Equipment
- What It's Like to Be a Police Officer
- Juvenile Law
- Identity Theft
- Drugs and Narcotics/Gangs
- K-9 Presentation and Demo
- Investigations/Evidence and Equipment
- Crime Scene Processing
- Personal Safety/Officer Safety
- Danger and Split Second Decisions/FATS Shoot-Don't Shoot Scenarios
- Use of Force and Police Liability
- Traffic Stops/Basic Safety Procedures
- Firearms Familiarization/Range
- Traffic Unit Functions/Traffic Crash Investigations/DUIs
- Tactical Operations
- Police Defensive Tactics
- Building Searches
- Communications/Tour Dispatch

No matter what topics you choose, remember the "B.O.O.T.S." theory... get the participants' Butts Out Of Their Seats! Hands-on classes are always the most popular, and you must remember that you are providing "info-tainment." Participants must be truly interested or you'll lose them. Several topics listed previously can be both classroom and hands-on, such as Crime Scene Processing, Shoot-Don't Shoot Scenarios using a FATS machine, Traffic Stops, Firearms/Range, Building Searches, and Communications/Dispatch Center Tour. Create a curriculum of interest, remembering that you are not training police officers.

Once your course outline is completed, the amount of information you have compiled will help you determine

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how many hours per night, how many times per week, and for how many weeks your class can be held. You can expect to find an expert in almost every field within your own agency. And, where there is no expert, you may find officers willing to research a topic to present to the class. Another option is to bring in an outside source to cover a particular topic.

■ **Choosing Instructors.** You should attempt to position instructors in class topics based on their expertise. You should also attempt to place the instructors where they want to instruct because they will provide a much better presentation. You will be amazed at the time, effort, research and preparation your officers (instructors) will put into their presentations if you only provide them with the autonomy to instruct. Each instructor will take on the challenge and come prepared to do his or her best.

Once your instructors are in place, each should receive a packet of information that includes the date and time of his/her presentation as well as teaching tips based on adult-learning concepts. Some instructors may have had little or no teaching experience. It is critical the instructors know the

value of using visual aids and other modern teaching techniques.

■ **Choosing a Location.** With the topics and instructors in place, the next step is to find a suitable location for the citizens police academy. This is usually not a problem for a police or sheriff's department, which almost always has classroom facilities that comfortably seat 20 to 30 people, along with a projection and video system as well as screen for overhead projector or slide projector presentations and a TV/VCR for videotapes or DVDs. A law enforcement agency that doesn't have access to these kinds of facilities can always use a nearby school, college or community center. Keep in mind that good lighting, comfort and audiovisual equipment are of the utmost importance. Keeping the same location from week to week is also helpful.

■ **Publicizing Your Citizens Police Academy.**

Once you have selected the starting date, it's time to publicize the academy. You can promote it through the local newsletter, local Web site, police department or sheriff's office Web site, local cable station, and local chamber of commerce. (Participants are generally required to live or work in the town of the law enforcement agency hosting the academy.)

You'll also want to notify the media. Press releases and press conferences are always a great way to get the ball rolling. Share your course outline and a brief description of what you hope to accomplish. Send personal invitations to judges, county supervisors, city council members, media representatives and other local VIPs (after you have conducted your first CPA, of course!). Another great way to locate other participants for your future classes is by word of mouth from the graduates of your very first class!

Calls May Come In Quickly... So Be Ready!

The coordinator is usually the *only* person designated to take calls from interested persons and send out information. The calls may come in quickly once word gets out. You should

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have information packets ready to send out to prospective applicants which includes an application, a course outline, a letter of invitation with pertinent facts about the academy, as well as minimum requirements for participation and graduation.

Are you going to reject applicants with felony convictions? How about misdemeanor convictions or outstanding arrest warrants? All this should be spelled out in advance. Have a polite rejection letter ready to send out to applicants who don't meet the minimum requirements, and an acceptance letter for those who are selected. One more letter will be needed for those who qualify but cannot be accepted because the class is full. Be sure to let these people know that they will be at the top of the list the next time the citizens police academy is offered. Do not be afraid to put people on a waiting list... a smaller number of participants usually allows for a more personal experience. Twenty per class seems to be the average, although classes have been held with as few as ten participants.

■ **Timing Is Everything.** Citizens police academy programs being conducted around the nation typically run between ten to twelve weeks in length, three to four hours, one night per week. Although this seems like enough time to teach citizens about the inner workings of their police department, many times this is not the case.

One problem that usually rears its ugly head each week in a citizens police academy is time constraints; each topic requires more time than was allotted. Time management is important. The instructors have to be warned that there is a limited amount of time available. The class needs breaks, and the

other instructors are entitled to their scheduled time. For this reason, it is important to limit the number of program topics, usually no more than two topics per night. A major complaint heard from attendees is that presentations seem rushed. The attendees want time to explore the topics being presented and to ask questions. If you find this to be a problem with your own program, you might consider reducing the number of topics being offered, or limit the very popular topics to one per night. Additionally, as your agency develops/improves its own program, keep in mind that any topics that can't be included due to time constraints can be used as a continuing education class for your alumni association.

■ **Graduation.** The last week of the class should be a time of celebration and usually involves pizza and/or graduation cake and refreshments. The evening also includes the presentation of graduation certificates to the participants.

Your participants have very busy lives, and keeping their commitment to attend an eight to twelve week course can be a big deal when you take into account sacrifices other family members may have made so that the participant could attend the CPA every week. Invite family members and children to the celebration! And, don't forget to invite your VIPs such as the mayor, council members and, of course, the chief of police.

It is important to note that graduation is not the end of involvement for your participants. Citizens police academy alumni associations have been formed across the nation. The associations, usually in conjunction with the local law enforcement agency, hold continuing education meetings every

couple of months. In addition, some support the law enforcement agency in a variety of other ways, including fundraising to purchase items on the agency's wish list that they are unable to purchase due to budget constraints, volunteering to assist with clerical duties within the agency, and volunteering for Citizens on Patrol and other law enforcement-related programs. Information about alumni associations will be featured in a future issue of **Connected**.

The benefits of putting together an academy in your town are many. Citizens who participate in a citizens police academy have a better understanding of law enforcement. As a result, you will have supporters rather than detractors. You will also have citizens who are not afraid to voice their opinions, usually in your favor, and you will have graduates who will be interested in continuing the partnership that develops between law enforcement agencies and citizens which will prove to be another valuable resource.

The most difficult portion of the process is simply starting... follow in the footsteps of hundreds of other Illinois law enforcement agencies and, as the Nike slogan says, "Just Do It!" ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Bruggema is a director of the newly formed Illinois Citizens Police Academy Association. Debbie and her husband, Don, are founding members of the Wheeling Citizens Police Academy Alumni Association and Wheeling's Citizens Patrol program. They are graduates of four Illinois Citizens Police Academy programs: Wheeling (1995), Buffalo Grove (2001), Des Plaines (2002), and Hoffman Estates (2006). The couple own and operate a typesetting business, and also manage the day-to-day operations of a large multi-jurisdictional mutual aid law enforcement organization in Illinois.

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