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# Notes from IACP 2009: Education-Based Discipline: A New Approach of Education as an Option to Suspension

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Like the vast majority of law enforcement agencies in the US, when a officer in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department committed an offense, the officer was disciplined. And that discipline mainly consisted of punishment in the form of suspension without pay. But, many times, handing out punishment to officers had unintended results:

- The officer would become bitter
- The officer's family would suffer a financial loss
- The officer would fight the punishment with the help of union lawyers, dragging out the case and wasting money
- The officer would learn nothing

The simple fact of the matter is that punishment means more paperwork, more money, and breeds resentment among officers and staff. And as a result, what does the department get? An officer who sat at home for five days? As Sheriff Baca looked at the results of punishment, he and his staff agreed that there should be a better way to deal with disciplinary measures.

### **Punishment vs. Discipline**

First of all, the Latin root of the word "discipline" does not lie in "punishment," but rather in "disciple." The process of becoming a disciple is one of learning and study for improvement, but current law enforcement disciplinary practices are more about punishment than discipleship. This being the case, Baca decided that disciplinary measures should be learning experiences, not punishment experiences.

### **Education-Based Discipline**

To shift the department away from punishment toward discipline, Baca's staff consulted with a variety of groups inside and outside of the department, like the leadership and training division, internal affairs, employee support (dept. psychologists, etc.), risk management, and more. They also explored current educational offerings within the department and in the community that they could take advantage of. From those meetings and offerings, they were able to come up with an alternative to suspension punishment, called education-based discipline (EBD).

The new system, implemented earlier this year, offers officers the chance to keep their pay, forgo days off, and participate in a variety of training and education programs in place of suspension. Educational offerings fall under 6 categories, depending on the offense:

- Problem-solving and self-management
- Skill enhancement
- Boundary recognition
- Substance misuse/abuse awareness
- Character reinforcement
- Mitigating and aggravating factors

A variety of classes and action items fall under each category and give officers the chance to learn from their mistakes, and not just regret them while they sit at home doing nothing.

### **How It Works**

When an officer commits an offense, depending on the severity of the offense, he or she can choose to either take the suspension, or waive the right to contest the punishment and agree to enter an alternative EBD option. The suspension is still recorded on the officer's record, but the officer does not lose pay over the matter. Of the 50 officers that have been offered this option since the implementation of the program, 49 have taken it.

### **Saving Time and Money**

This new approach was—at first—greeted with some skepticism on the part of the union. But as these cases have played out, the amount of time and money the union has spent on lawyers to contest suspensions has dropped dramatically. And the paperwork that had to accompany all that so-called discipline on the part of the union and the Sheriff's Dept., has also dropped.

### **Change in Attitude**

Not only is the new system saving time and money, but officers are actually taking part in educating themselves about their specific problem areas and actually changing their behavior. Before EBD, suspensions bred discontent and resentment. Now EBD gives officers a chance to improve themselves, and many have actually thanked their teachers and command staff for the experience.

### **Applications**

The presenters admitted that their exact system may not work in all areas. Their department is large and has a vast amount of resources inside and outside of the organization. And all agencies are different. But, the principles of EBD can be applied anywhere. Take a look at your agency's disciplinary practices. Are they meant as punishment or as educational experiences? Make your disciplinary actions based on helping officers to change their behavior and become your successors not your begrudging enemies.

#### ***Presenters:***

*Lee Baca, Sheriff, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Dept., CA (not present)*

*Thomas Laing, Commander, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Dept., CA*

*Michael Parker, Lieutenant, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Dept., CA*

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