

Town of Signal Mountain Police Department Comprehensive Management Review

The University of Tennessee
Municipal Technical Advisory Service
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A. Project History

The Town of Signal Mountain has asked the Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) to conduct a review of each functional service area of the town. Rex Barton, Police Management Consultant, began work for the police department review on April 6, 2023, with field work beginning on May 1. Interviews were conducted with randomly chosen supervisors and police officers, as well as the chief of police and the town manager.

The study reviewed department operations, staffing levels, fleet, training, equipment, and physical plant.

B. What is a CMR?

A Comprehensive Management Review is a study performed by the University of Tennessee's Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) for cities wanting to improve the overall quality and efficiency of their municipal operations. The study involves an in-depth review and analysis of every facet of the local government conducted by experienced MTAS consultants. The end product is a report delivered to the manager and governing body which contains suggestions for improving service to the community.

MTAS is uniquely qualified in three ways to provide these services to Tennessee cities. First, the typical Comprehensive Management Review is conducted by a team of professionally trained consultants having vast experience in a wide range of disciplines. Second, the study is performed by persons who have no financial or other ties to the community which might tend to bias any recommendations which might be made. Third, the study is performed at no charge to the community – no small consideration in an era of tight budgetary constraints.

MTAS, which is a branch of the University of Tennessee, does not have any regulatory authority – no authority to impose or demand any particular solution for a Tennessee municipality. In the tradition of a university, MTAS's primary mission is to make recommendations to cities about how they might satisfactorily resolve their problems. The CMR for Signal Mountain is, therefore, not binding on the town. The town is free to accept or reject our findings or suggestions for improvement.

A CMR is not an investigation, at least not in the same sense that a regulatory agency or law enforcement entity might pursue. A CMR is a study – an effort to determine the operational status of a municipal department. It is undertaken in an effort to help resolve vexing problems and not for the purpose of punishing or criticizing a department, its leadership or its staff.

Cities receiving a Comprehensive Management Review (CMR) are expected to consider the various suggestions and recommendations with an open mind and to consider implementing those ideas which might be applicable in their communities. The CMR is intended to be a learning tool to be used by the manager, board members, and the municipal employees as they begin the task of re-designing and modernizing their facilities and operations. MTAS understands that cities may find it difficult to implement some of the suggestions made in a CMR. However, our purposes will be served if the community gives thoughtful consideration to the recommendations and if such consideration prompts the discovery of better ways of doing business.

The MTAS employee assigned to conduct the study of the police department was:

- Rex Barton, MTAS Police Consultant

C. Methodology

The methods MTAS used to perform the study of the Signal Mountain Police Department may be briefly summarized as follows:

DOCUMENT REVIEWS

- A review of the organizational chart for SMPD.
- Crime in Tennessee, a compilation of crime and arrest data provided to the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation by the Signal Mountain Police Department.

- A review of the town's budget – with concentration on the police department.
- A review of 2020 Census data for the Town of Signal Mountain.

ON-SITE INTERVIEWS

- Mike Williams, Chief of Police
- Elaine Brunell, Town Manager
- Scott Ogrodowczyk, Captain
- Daniel Fletcher, Lieutenant
- Stephen Deanne, Lieutenant
- Marcus Bingham, Sergeant
- David Holloway, Detective
- Sarah Tabor, Police Officer
- Dylan Buckler, Police Officer

The interviews were conducted during on-site visits on May 1st and 2nd, 2023. The purpose of the interviews of police personnel are fairly obvious – to determine how the personnel perform their duties and, in particular, their relationship with the Chief of Police and command staff. All interviews were conducted in the police headquarters.

D. Scope of the Study

- The study reviewed the overall operations of the police department, particularly as to the service provided to the citizens of the town.
- Organizational structure.
- Training.
- Fleet.
- Equipment.
- Physical Plant

E. Signal Mountain Demographics

Signal Mountain is a small municipality located in east Tennessee – approximately 8 miles from downtown Chattanooga. As of 2022, it had a certified population of 8,852.

Other demographic information is summarized as follows:

COMPARATIVE STATISTICS	Signal Mountain	Tennessee, State-wide
Median household income (2019)	\$114,781	\$56,071
Median house/condo value (2019)	\$419,325	\$191,900
Percentage of renter occupied residences	13%	33%
Full-time law enforcement employees per 1,000 residents (2015)	2.03	2.52

F. MTAS Observations

The Signal Mountain Police Department has no glaring issues. It is well managed, well equipped, and well trained. The department provides a high level of service for the citizens of Signal Mountain.

Overall Operations/Service

Signal Mountain enjoys a very low crime rate, as evidenced by a comparison of some area cities and cities with similar demographics.

City	Crime rate per 1,000 residents
Chattanooga	139.41
Collegedale	66.03
Lookout Mountain	14.85
Belle Meade	18.37
Signal Mountain	9.79

The relatively low call volume allows officers to spend more time on calls for service, as opposed to larger cities where officers run from call to call. This allows the police officers to do more “problem solving,” rather than merely writing reports. It also provides opportunities to develop relationships with citizens, as evidenced by the high level of support the community appears to have for the police department.

Compensation

The department has experienced low turnover until the last year or so. The department fell behind other area police departments in compensation over the last several years, and the recent turnover can be attributed to that. There is unprecedented turnover in the field of law enforcement across the country and across Tennessee. It is critically important that cities maintain competitive compensations packages and working conditions.

The town recently adopted a new compensation package for the police department, beginning with the new fiscal year. The new package, along with the caring culture of the department’s management should alleviate some of the turnover. It is important to monitor the recruitment and retention efforts of other police departments to avoid falling behind in the future.

Staffing

The staffing level relative to population is substantially lower than the state average. This is not necessarily a problem. The low crime rate and the community’s support of the department (a conclusion reached by the absence of complaints) show a high level of service with the existing staffing level.

The current staffing level often results in two officers scheduled to work night shift. If an officer calls in sick, there is a scramble to provide adequate staffing for the shift. This problem is compounded when there are open positions. The town should plan to add one more position over the next few years.

Accreditation

The police department is accredited by the Tennessee Law Enforcement Accreditation program. It is the second smallest agency in the state to be accredited. Assessors with the accreditation program have reviewed the department's written directives (policies and procedures) as part of the accreditation program processes. For this reason, this Comprehensive Management Review did not involve an additional review of the written directives.

Accreditation means the police department meets more than 150 professional standards of the program. The town's insurer provides a discount on liability insurance for the department being accredited.

Compensatory Time

The town utilizes compensatory time and pay for overtime. Officers accumulate significant amounts of compensatory time and use compensatory time instead of annual leave (vacation). Some of the officers then sell their vacation time back to the town. When the compensation package fell behind, this practice provided additional income for the officers. Under the new compensation plan there should be no need for that.

Compensatory time is an accounting liability, and the town is required to reflect accrued compensatory time in the budget. The town should establish a limit on accrued compensatory time that is less than the Fair Labor Standards Act limit and pay for overtime in excess of that limit. It is recommended that the town limit for compensatory time be no more than 80 hours.

With the new compensation plan officers should not need to "sell" vacation back to the city and should be encouraged to utilize their vacation days.

Organizational Structure

The department's organizational structure is adequate. Aside from the patrol division, there is a chief of police, one captain, and one detective. Each patrol shift is supervised by a lieutenant, with a sergeant as an assistant supervisor. So long as the sergeant is not an integral part of the chain of command when the lieutenant is on duty, this structure is not top heavy. When the lieutenant is on duty, the sergeant serves as a patrol officer and field training officer. In the absence of the lieutenant, the sergeant becomes the shift supervisor.

Training

The department utilizes a combination of specialized training schools and on-line video training. The on-line training is cost effective, with the Town's insurer picking up the annual subscription cost. The department also conducts in-house training classes for officers and has several officers certified as instructors in multiple functional areas.

Everyone interviewed rated the department's training as high as the rating allowed. A common theme in the interview was, "If we can justify the need for the training, the chief will find a way for us to go."

All members of the department are Crisis Intervention Team certified. The primary purpose of the Crisis Intervention Team is to reduce injuries to officers and to mental health consumers and to appropriately redirect mental health consumers from the judicial system to the services and support needed to stabilize mental health conditions and reduce contact with the police.

The only weakness cited for training was staffing issues faced when officers are away at a class. The staffing level is quite lean when fully staffed, and open positions exacerbate the difficulties of having officers missing shifts for training classes.

Fleet

The department has a "Home Fleet," meaning officers are assigned a specific vehicle and are allowed to drive the vehicle to and from work, as well as to off-duty court appearances. Home fleets are particularly important today. As police departments struggle to attract and retain police officers, having a home fleet can be a deciding factor for a prospective employee or keeping a current employee.

The home fleet also "disperses" the fleet. Should a natural disaster occur near the police department, the department would not lose vehicles parked at the headquarters. This type of vehicle loss has occurred in several cities in Tennessee.

The town currently maintains an eight-year replacement cycle for police vehicles. Most police departments utilize a seven-year cycle. At the time of the field work for this project the police department was equipping three new patrol vehicles, replacing three older vehicles. Vehicles purchased in 2016, and scheduled to be replaced next year, have between 77,000 and 100,000 miles, meaning the eight-year cycle is not resulting in extremely high mileage before replacement. The police chief did indicate the vehicle maintenance costs have increased as the age of the fleet has increased.

UNIT	YEAR	MAKE/MODEL	MILEAGE
PD 181	2016	Ford Interceptor	94,000
PD 185	2016	Ford Interceptor	100,000
PD 186	2016	Ford Interceptor	77,000
PD 187	2016	Ford Interceptor	85,000
PD 188	2016	Ford Interceptor	77,000
PD 189	2017	Ford Interceptor	113,000
PD 190	2017	Ford Interceptor	70,000
PD 191	2018	Ford Interceptor	42,000
PD 192	2020	Ford Explorer	55,000
PD 193	2022	Ford Explorer	14,000
PD 194	2022	Ford Explorer	26,000
PD 195	2022	Ford Explorer	28,000
PD 196	2023	Ford Explorer	1,700
PD 197	2023	Ford Explorer	3,300
PD 198	2023	Ford Explorer	1,200
PD 199	2023	Ford Explorer	2,500

The town utilizes a fleet replacement program, budgeting a part of each vehicle's ultimate replacement cost in each year's budget. The actual cost of vehicle replacement has actually been higher than the vehicle replacement fund expectations. Future years' contributions to the replacement fund should be increased to ensure the fund can replace vehicles on schedule without requiring additional general fund revenues.

Equipment

The Signal Mountain Police Department is well equipped. Every person interviewed rated the equipment very high. Observation of departmental equipment was impressive. The high level of technology is likely what allows the police department to perform as well as it does with the current staffing level.

Officers utilize “E-citations,” allowing for the scanning of driver’s license and vehicle information. This greatly reduces opportunities for error and speeds up the process of issuing a citation. Information from the citation is downloaded into the court system, eliminating the need for duplicate data entry. Reports for other types of calls can be entered into the system and downloaded to records management software, also eliminating duplicate data entry.

Personal equipment issued to police officers was adequate, from body armor to firearms. All officers are equipped with body cameras, and the vehicles are currently being outfitted with dash camera systems.

Physical Plant

The police department and the fire department share a building on the Town Hall campus. The building has been added onto multiple times over the years, and there are multiple HVAC units for the facility. The spaces used by the two departments have shifted over time, but the police department currently utilizes approximately 2,000 square feet.

This table shows the square footage per police officer of police department facilities that have been built in the last few years:

Department	Facility Size (Square Feet)	Sworn Officers	Square Feet Per Officer
Tullahoma	10,000	37	270
Martin	15,664*	30	522
Brentwood	48,355	67	721
Average			348
Signal Mountain	2,000	15	133

*Includes a courtroom/community meeting room

The department utilizes the small space well, and there were few complaints about the physical plant.

The property room is small, and there is no space for evidence preparation. Department personnel appear to be diligent in disposing of items no longer needed as evidence; otherwise, there would not be room for the items that do need to be in the

evidence room. With no evidence preparation area, there is no ventilation exhaust system. Officers may be exposed to potentially toxic substances (fentanyl, for example).

A long-range recommendation is for the town to build a new facility for the police department, aiming for at least the average square footage per officer of the table above. The facility should contain ample evidence room storage, built-in temporary storage, and an evidence preparation area with a ventilation system. The area should also be equipped with a camera system to record money counting and the weighing of drug evidence.

Recommendations

As was mentioned earlier in this report, there are no glaring issues with the Signal Mountain Police Department. It is well managed, well equipped, and well trained. The officers interviewed are positive about the department and town.

The governing body and the citizens should be proud of this department.

Short Term Recommendations (Less than one year):

1. Cap compensatory time to 80 hours and encourage officers to utilize available vacation days.
2. Create an annual compensation report that compares the Signal Mountain Police Department with area law enforcement agencies and share the report with the employees. An annual review should keep town management and governance aware of compensation needs to stay competitive with area agencies.

Long Term Recommendations (Longer than one year):

1. Add one position to the police department. Adding a position will create flexibility in scheduling for shift coverage and for training.
2. First, develop engineering plans for a new police facility.
3. Build a new police facility with at least the average square feet per officer listed in the table as part of this report.