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The Unsung Heroes

Professional Staff and Chief of Staff's Role in Organizational Success

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In policing, the spotlight often shines on the uniformed officers patrolling the streets and responding to emergencies. However, behind the scenes at every successful policing agency is a dedicated team of professional staff who play a crucial role in ensuring operational efficiency and organizational effectiveness. Among these professionals, the chief of staff has a strategic role overseeing administrative functions and significantly shaping the agency's culture and strategic direction.

For over a decade, the Colorado State Patrol (CSP) has been proactively increasing the roles of professional staff across the organization. This forward-thinking effort has proven successful, allowing troopers to focus on their core duties, such as patrolling the roads and responding to emergencies. In the past, the CSP, like many other policing agencies, filled new administrative tasks or specialty functions with troopers. However, this approach often led to troopers being pulled away from their primary duties to learn new skills to meet the ever-changing demands of a policing organization.

Thanks to the CSP's early efforts to increase professional staff, the organization was better prepared than many when sworn staffing levels plummeted in 2020. Despite this challenge, the CSP remains steadfast in its commitment to meet the public's increasing demands for transparency, community engagement, improved customer service, and timely response. This resilience is a testament to the importance the CSP places on professional staff in critical policing roles.

Professional staff in policing face their own set of challenges. Across the CSP, they historically have felt overlooked, undervalued, and underutilized. Policing agencies typically prioritize training, promotional growth opportunities, and competitive wages for sworn personnel. Recognizing this, in 2022, the CSP chief of staff (also a professional staff member) initiated a multiyear project to bring the professional staff members together to better understand their needs and increase engagement and job satisfaction. Recently, three project initiatives added value to the professional staff members of the CSP.



The Role of Professional Staff

By way of background, nonsworn professional staff in policing agencies fulfill a wide range of roles, serving as administrative assistants, records technicians, IT specialists, victim advocates, grants specialists, project managers, and public relations experts, among other positions. These individuals bring a diverse set of skills and expertise that complement the work of sworn officers, enabling the agency to function smoothly and efficiently.

In the CSP, administrative assistants handle the day-to-day tasks that keep the agency running, from managing schedules and programs to organizing meetings and maintaining records. Records technicians respond to thousands of records requests each year. The IT specialists maintain the agency's technology infrastructure, ensuring that communication systems, databases, and other critical tools are up-to-date and secure. Victim advocates offer empathy and support to those who have been victims of violence. The grants specialists secure millions of dollars of funding for the organization, while project managers ensure the agency implements new technology and processes with sound change management principles in mind. In addition, public relations experts handle media inquiries and work to maintain the agency's public image.

These are only a few examples of the nonsworn positions within the CSP. The CSP has nearly 1,200 members, and approximately 12 percent are professional staff. (This number does not include dispatchers.) According to the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) Critical Issues in Policing report, *Embracing Civilianization*, in July 2024, professional staff make up anywhere from 20 percent to 35 percent of staff across policing organizations.¹ Despite CSP's efforts, these job classifications continue to be understaffed and underfunded, as any increases require legislative budget approval.

Addressing Challenges and Identifying Solutions

As many departments have experienced, integrating professional staff into the operations and culture of a policing agency doesn't come without challenges. Over the last 10 years, the CSP has been working toward hiring more skilled professional staff, and troopers and leadership have become accustomed to relinquishing the administrative roles and tasks they once were responsible for completing. This has allowed the CSP to hire professionals skilled in data analysis, evidence and records management, marketing, and other specialized areas.

“Having a high level of emotional

However, the decentralized leadership and lack of prioritization of professional staff throughout the CSP

intelligence, effective communication skills, and a strategic vision helps contribute to a healthy policing culture.”

prompted the multiyear project to align the professional staff group. Likely, within most police departments, a nonsworn professional staff's first or second-level leader is a sworn officer who is also responsible for a team of officers. This is true for the CSP. Very few professional staff units have promotional opportunities beyond the first-level supervisor. Most of CSP second-level sworn supervisors are also supervisors of a few professional

staff members. Since many sworn supervisors lead CSP professional staff, the staff have struggled to change processes, advocate for training and recognition, and feel included in the CSP culture. They needed an advocate with authority.

Seeing this as an opportunity, the CSP chief of staff initiated a project that included three strategies to increase the cohesion and engagement of the agency's professional staff. These three initiatives included developing a strategic plan specific to professional staff, reviewing job descriptions and pay equity, and implementing regular communication and training for the group. Clear communication, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to demonstrating the value of professional staff were the cornerstones of the project's success.

Creating a Strategic Plan

Creating a strategic plan was the foundation of the project and the group's effort to align their work within the CSP. Many volunteered to help develop a plan with tangible, actionable strategies to improve processes, increase efficiencies, and increase employee engagement. The strategic plan was created with a working group representing many professional staff roles. At first, it was difficult for members to realize that professional staff with different tasks or work products—victim advocates and records technicians, for instance—experienced some of the same challenges; however, after working for six months, the group identified goals and strategies that would benefit the majority of the CSP's professional staff. This hard work culminated in a three-year plan that addresses onboarding and training,

process improvement, professional development, wellness, and culture. After a year and a half into the plan, work continues as policies, processes, and systems are updated or refined. This document brought the group together. It brought awareness of what other staff were working on and how tasks and processes overlap. The strategic plan outputs have been proven to increase efficiencies and define the work being done by professional staff across the organization.

Job Description and Pay Equity Review

After completing the strategic plan, the CSP chief of staff and the human resources (HR) department initiated an overhaul of all professional staff job descriptions and conducted a pay equity analysis for all 150 CSP professional staff. This process began by asking each professional staff member to complete a two-week task and workload analysis. Each member documented the work they were completing. They provided the amount of time the task took and answered two important questions. First, were there any pain points with the task, and if so, what was their recommendation for streamlining? Secondly, each member provided feedback as to how the task has evolved over time. This information was used to craft job descriptions that truly reflected the work being completed. In partnership with the professional staff member, the job description was finalized and classified by HR. Once everyone had an accurate job description and classification, HR completed a pay equity study for each staff member. This analysis resulted in more than two-thirds of employees receiving a pay adjustment. This work leveled the playing field; ensured everyone had the right job description; and received equitable compensation for the knowledge, skills, and training they brought to the CSP. This process took nearly a year to complete and was an unfunded initiative; however, the CSP made it a budgetary priority to stay competitive with the professional staff jobs in the private sector.

Regular Communication and Training

The CSP needed to establish a cadence of communication with the professional staff beyond the work of the strategic plan and job description review. To increase engagement, establish a healthy culture, and encourage networking, the chief of staff hosts a monthly meeting and an annual three-day in-service training. The monthly meetings highlight various topics to promote organizational learning, best

practice sharing, networking, and education. Sometimes, guest speakers are invited, other professional staff lead the meeting and share information, or the group divides into small groups to discuss a recent professional growth training that members have ongoing access to. The three-day in-service is held annually in September and all professional staff are welcome to attend. This is a great time for members to get to know one another (since the teams are scattered across the state) and learn from one another. In-service training is a high-paced, highly engaging, and fun atmosphere. The planning committee brings together an agenda that all professional staff members will enjoy, covering topics such as wellness, communication strategies, financial and project management, agency initiatives and projects, and other inclusive topics. One recent addition that benefited members during in-service was quick, 15-minute introductions to different units across the CSP. Many professional staff don't know much about criminal interdiction, K9s, aircraft, investigations, commercial motor vehicle enforcement, hazmat response, and other police functions unless they work in that unit. These unit "showcases" were valuable for the meeting attendees, and staff members left feeling more knowledgeable about the agency. In-service is filled with team-building exercises, social events, and competitions. These activities drive both friendly and work-oriented conversations that build substantive friendships and long-lasting connections. The CSP professional staff look forward to the annual in-service training each year as they feel a sense of belonging and value.



Enhancing Operational Effectiveness Outcomes

One of the greatest contributions of professional staff is enhancing operational effectiveness. By streamlining administrative processes, these positions free up police officers to focus on their primary duties—protecting and serving the community.

Professional staff also support specialized units within the agency. The CSP found that professional staff operate effectively and apply their program expertise to the field of policing. Hiring people with the skill sets to provide data analysis, strategic planning, policy development, and program support enables the CSP to benefit from years of experience and specialization. Hiring individuals trained to do these tasks is valuable beyond just taking something off an officer's plate—these professionals possess the skills to improve processes, increase efficiencies, and enhance customer service, contributing to the organization's success.

In the past few years, it has become apparent that those in professional staff roles want to do meaningful work. They care about the mission of policing organizations and want to identify with an important purpose. It is critical that professional staff across the organization can identify how the work they do contributes to the mission. In the CSP's case, its mission is to save lives. Through engagement and conversation, CSP professional staff members know how they support saving lives indirectly through their expertise or specialty. Of course, their work is often considered "behind the scenes," but they see the mission could not be accomplished without them.

The Strategic Role of the Chief of Staff

Most administrative work completed in the CSP is ultimately led by the chief of staff, who is at the helm of the professional staff. This role is vital for the agency's strategic direction and overall success. The chief of staff serves as a key adviser to the chief, providing leadership and vision for the agency. This role advises on implementing policies, processes, and procedures, ensuring that the agency's goals are met and that administrative and operational functions run smoothly.

The chief of staff is also instrumental in change management. Working closely with the chief and senior executive leaders, the chief of staff identifies strategic initiatives that further the agency's mission and values, which involves researching best practices, consulting with stakeholders, and effectively implementing policies and processes. For the project initiative with professional staff, the chief of staff was the best advocate for this group, as the position had the right level of authority and

influence to make the changes occur for the professional staff who work within all units of the CSP.

Having the chief of staff as a professional staff position has worked extremely well for the CSP. The chief of staff is the first nonsworn member of the executive command staff and provides a different perspective on agency issues and initiatives. This perspective helps diversify the approach to problem-solving and conflict resolution. The chief of staff position is the “glue” of the organization, connecting the silos that are inevitably created across the agency. Due to the organizational structure of policing organizations, in a very linear, top-down approach, a chief of staff who is aware of each unit and their function can quickly identify cross-collaboration strategies among work groups and teams.

Fostering a Healthy Organizational Culture

One of the most important contributions of the chief of staff is fostering a healthy organizational culture. Having a high level of emotional intelligence, effective communication skills, and a strategic vision helps contribute to a healthy policing culture. This involves promoting ethical standards, identifying risks, and putting people first. A healthy organizational culture is one where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to perform their best.

Promoting ethical standards is a key aspect of this. The chief of staff ensures that the agency operates with integrity and transparency, setting the tone for ethical behavior throughout the organization. This involves implementing policies and procedures that promote accountability and officer safety.

Identifying risks is also crucial. The chief of staff should have a “bird’s eye view” of leaders across the organization. Essentially, the CSP chief of staff can break down silos of work or information to increase the effectiveness of both the administrative and operational aspects of the organization, thereby mitigating risk. Policing has been under great scrutiny, and the more eyes on administrative processes, the better.

Encouraging an engaged workforce is another important aspect of fostering a healthy organizational culture. The chief of staff helps to ensure the agency puts its members first. The organization will struggle to accomplish its mission if it doesn’t

have an engaged workforce that feels valued, respected, and confident in the work they are being tasked with.

Specific to leading the professional staff group, the CSP chief of staff helps acclimate individuals to working for a policing agency. This culture is unique as compared to other industries and workplaces. Access to information and education helps the professional staff feel better suited to be successful in their new role within the organization. The chief of staff teaches topics like organizational structure and chain of command, rank and titles, equipment, policy, processes, and trooper habits and mannerisms. Elements that heavily influence culture can be nuanced; however, understanding why some of these things exist could have a dramatic impact on a professional staff member's ability to be successful. Essentially, the CSP chief of staff helps other professional staff "speak and understand trooper."

Conclusion

IACP RESOURCES

- [Civilian Personnel \(Model Policy\)](#)

theIACP.org

- [The Importance of Civilians in Modern Policing](#)
- [Sworn vs. Civilian PIOs](#)

In conclusion, professional nonsworn staff play a crucial role in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of policing agencies. Their diverse skills and expertise support police officers, streamline administrative processes, and improve communication and coordination. At the helm, the chief of staff provides leadership and vision and fosters a healthy organizational culture.

By recognizing the value of professional nonsworn staff and the pivotal role of the chief of staff, policing agencies can enhance their operational capabilities, build stronger community relationships,

and create a more adaptable and resilient organization. As policing continues to evolve, the contributions of professional staff and the chiefs of staff will remain essential to the success and sustainability of policing agencies. ❤️



Sarah Allen is the Colorado State Patrol's (CSP) first chief of staff—and the first nonsworn member of the executive command staff in the agency's history. A member of the CSP since 2008, she has experience in organizational administration, strategy development, and long-term budget planning. She received the IACP's 40 Under 40 Award in 2021.

Note:

¹Police Executive Research Forum, *Embracing Civilianization: Integrating Professional Staff to Advance Modern Policing*, Critical Issues in Policing Series (Washington, DC, 2024).

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