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# THE FLORIDA LAW ENFORCEMENT RESEARCH COALITION

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Florida Law Enforcement Research Coalition (FLERC) was established to link law enforcement departments and researchers in the state of Florida for the purposes of conducting collaborative policy-relevant research. It was unique among the NIJ-sponsored Locally Initiated Research Partnerships in the number of law enforcement agencies targeted as constituents and a major strength of the model was its dedication to serve departments of all types (e.g., municipal, county, university) and sizes.

The initial objectives of FLERC were to determine the research needs of law enforcement agencies around the state and to address those needs through projects involving FLERC staff and/or by facilitating research collaborations between other Florida researchers and agencies. FLERC quickly developed into a statewide law enforcement research-related resource with increasing credibility and name recognition throughout Florida and expanded its mission to address other law enforcement needs including policy development, training assessment, training and information dissemination.

Below we summarize how FLERC accomplished its original objectives and expanded its work to address other needs of law enforcement agencies in the state of Florida. This work was accomplished with two grants from the National Institute of Justice. Additionally, we sought and received additional funds from other sources to support projects that were consistent with FLERC's objectives<sup>1</sup>.

## II. DEVELOPMENT AND MARKETING

FLERC grew out of a series of meetings held with officials of law enforcement agencies and associations around the state. The objectives of these meetings were to introduce and promote the concept of FLERC and to seek agency confidence and participation in a collaboration with law enforcement researchers. Assured of cooperation, FLERC applied for and received start-up funding from the National Institute of Justice through Florida State University.

The following entities appointed representatives to serve on an advisory board: Florida Sheriffs Association, Florida Police Chiefs Association, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute, Florida Chapter of the

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<sup>1</sup>No federal funds were expended in writing proposals or conducting the work for any of these projects.

International Association of Law Enforcement Planners, Tallahassee Police Department, Florida State University College of Social Sciences and Florida State University School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. The advisory board held its first meeting in January of 1996, at which FLERC goals and objectives, organizational structure, preliminary and future activities, and funding strategies were discussed. A press conference announcing the inception and goals of FLERC was held on the following day.

Promotional brochures, summarizing FLERC's purpose and organization and listing contact information, were printed; Rolodex cards were developed; and letters of introduction were written. These materials were mailed to all municipal agencies, sheriff's offices and "other" agencies (e.g., university police, airport police). In March 1996, the State Law Enforcement Chiefs Association, which includes a variety of enforcement officers not otherwise represented (e.g., highway patrol, game and fish commission, division of insurance fraud), asked and was approved by the advisory board to join FLERC. Introductory materials were subsequently sent to all individuals belonging to this association, as well. (Inquiries about FLERC membership were also received from the Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association and the Florida Department of Corrections, but the additions of these organizations to FLERC were deemed to be either premature or inappropriate.)

"Marketing" FLERC, an ongoing process, was particularly intense during the first year. A computerized slide show was developed for making formal presentations and a large display banner was commissioned. FLERC staff attended the various major law enforcement conferences in the state. At one of the conferences of the Florida Police Chiefs Association, FLERC personnel hosted a booth. The banner identified the booth, and brochures and Rolodex cards were available to interested persons. The computerized slide show played continuously and the FLERC Executive Director answered questions. At several other training conferences, FLERC staff served as presenters on various training panels. These presentations on various law enforcement topics helped to establish the credibility of FLERC staff. Conferences attended included those of the Florida Sheriffs Association, Florida Police Chiefs Association, Florida Violent Crime Council, Florida Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Training, Florida Chapter of the International Association of Law Enforcement Planners, Criminal Justice Training Center Directors Association, Police Executive Research Forum, and International Association of Chiefs of Police. FLERC representatives also attended such functions as the Florida Sheriffs Association annual barbeque, a reception of the Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association and the Big Bend Law Enforcement Association annual Christmas breakfast.

A FLERC Homepage on the Internet was developed. The president's column in the March 1996 edition of the *Florida Police Chief* magazine publicized and commended the FLERC concept and recommended support by departments of FLERC initiatives.

### **III. FACILITATING COLLABORATION BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND AGENCIES**

A major goal of FLERC was to develop collaborative research projects involving law enforcement agencies and researchers. To do this FLERC identified the research needs of law enforcement agencies and then responded to those needs by either (1) linking agencies and researchers to develop collaborative projects, or (2) developing FLERC-sponsored collaborative projects. Below we describe how FLERC identified the research needs of Florida law enforcement, identified law enforcement researchers around the state, and facilitated collaborations between researchers and agencies. In the subsequent section we describe how FLERC responded directly to the identified research needs of Florida law enforcement .

#### **Identifying Agency Research Needs**

A two-pronged approach was used to identify the research needs of Florida law enforcement: a survey and focus groups. A survey was prepared and distributed to all municipal, county and other law enforcement agencies in June 1996. Respondents were asked to indicate for each of 32 listed law enforcement issues (e.g., police-community relations, officer morale, officer stress, personnel attrition), how important the issue was to their agencies. They were also asked to list any additional concerns and to indicate if they would be willing to send representatives to focus groups to discuss these issues further. Responses were received from 61 percent of the sheriff's offices, 66 percent of the municipal police departments and 56 percent of other agencies. The issues found to be of greatest concern among the sheriffs' offices were: juvenile crime, police-community relations, domestic violence, officer safety and drug use/sales. Among the municipal police departments, the top five concerns were: officer safety, personnel selection, police-community relations, officer use of force and officer misconduct.

The survey results provided guidance for the focus groups which followed. Specifically, the purpose of the focus groups was to identify more specifically the problems facing agencies and to explore how research might help to resolve these problems. Four FLERC personnel received training in focus group facilitation and then held focus groups around the state. Between 10 and 15 representatives from law enforcement agencies participated in these all-day functions. After they had been given an introduction to FLERC and an overview of the day's agenda, each participant identified the three most pressing problems facing his/her agency. These were shared with the group and used, in conjunction with the survey data, to identify the most pressing problems facing the group. These most pressing problems were discussed and ideas were generated with regard to how research might be useful in solving the problems.

## **Identifying Law Enforcement Researchers**

To identify the law enforcement researchers around the state, FLERC sent out introductory letters which described FLERC and encouraged law enforcement researchers to become involved. Included with these letters were surveys for interested researchers to complete. For the same 32 issues presented in the law enforcement survey, the researchers were asked to indicate the degree of their interest in the topic. In August 1996, these materials, along with brochures, were mailed to the 51 chairpersons at 16 public and private universities in the state whose departments offer graduate programs in criminology, sociology, political science, public administration, social work and psychology. These written materials were also sent to the 145 non-student members of the American Society of Criminology and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences who resided in Florida. Interested persons were asked to return copies of their survey responses and their vitae to FLERC. Responses were received from 45 researchers at 15 different institutions of higher education and various training programs around the state.

## **Facilitating Partnerships Between Florida Agencies and Researchers**

The survey information was disseminated to all of the identified FLERC researchers to make them aware of the highest priority research needs of law enforcement agencies from around the state. Although no formal assessment was made regarding the collaborations that developed merely from that information dissemination, we were made aware of several projects that were initiated as a result of researchers contacting their local agencies to propose projects related to the identified research needs.

Collaborations were also facilitated on a case by case basis when FLERC identified--through the focus groups, conference discussions, and agency phone calls--of individual agency research needs. When such needs were conveyed, we would identify from our list, researchers in the same general geographic area who had indicated interest in the specific topics and link the agency and researcher for purposes of completing the identified projects. Examples include (a) facilitating discussions between a chief and a local university researcher regarding an evaluation of the department's foot patrol operations, and (b) assisting south Florida researchers in the development of an evaluation design for a Juvenile Assessment Center.

## **IV. FLERC-SPONSORED RESEARCH PROJECTS**

In addition to facilitating collaborations between researchers and agencies, FLERC conducted research, using FLERC staff, in response to identified needs.

### **Police Use of Force**

Police use of force was a topic which was clearly of keen interest to our Advisory

Board, to participants at the two annual conferences, to focus group participants, and to the departments responding to the survey. The particular issue of where the use of pepper spray should be placed on the Florida use of force continuum arose, almost simultaneously, from two sources. First, at a meeting of the Tallahassee Police Department's Defensive Tactics Committee, the question arose concerning where such spray was placed by other agencies throughout the state. Second, the Defensive Tactics Task Force subcommittee of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Division of Criminal Justice Standards and Training declined to recommend OC placement on the FDLE use of force continuum until they had more information about the current policies and practices throughout the state. FLERC, therefore, volunteered to conduct a statewide questionnaire to determine where law enforcement place the use of pepper spray in their use of force continua. The questionnaire solicited information regarding (1) whether or not the agency allowed or required their officers to carry OC spray, and (2) if their officers could or had to carry OC spray, at which levels of the force continuum they were authorized to use it. This questionnaire was disseminated in the Spring of 1996 to all municipal police departments in the state. The results of this survey were received with great interest at the Training Conference of the Florida Police Chiefs Association and are being used by the FDLE Division of Criminal Justice Standards and Training to determine where to place OC spray on the state-approved use of force continuum.

Also relevant to the interests of the FLERC constituency were national trends with regard to departmental monitoring of officer use of force and the receipt of complaints of excessive force. We sought and received funding from Florida State University to follow up on a national survey of these topics which we conducted in 1991 (under the auspices of the Police Foundation). Specifically, we collected from the 56 largest municipalities in the U.S. data from 1993 regarding force monitoring policies and complaints of excessive force. The results were received with interest at the annual conferences of the Florida Sheriffs' and Florida Police Chiefs Associations.

### **Cargo Security**

FLERC was told at two of its South Florida focus groups that losses from cargo theft at the Port of Miami and the Miami International Airport were estimated to exceed \$50 million annually at the wholesale level, or \$125 million at the retail level. A new multi-agency task force, composed of representatives of the Metro-Dade Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Customs Bureau, and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement had begun to work together to investigate cargo crimes involving stolen vehicles and loads; cargo missing from trucks, airports and seaport terminals; as well as armed robberies and hijackings involving cargo theft. FLERC was invited to participate in the meetings of this task force, as well as to observe their field operations. FLERC staff attended several task force meetings and participated in multiple investigations. Due to turnover in local task force staff and leadership in the Metro-Dade department, functions of the task force, and thus of the FLERC involvement, were radically curtailed.

## **V. OTHER FLERC PROJECTS**

As mentioned above, FLERC objectives expanded in accordance with the needs of our constituency. Specifically, several FLERC projects were not geared toward addressing research needs, but instead served to address the policy, training and general information needs of Florida law enforcement.

### **Domestic and Sexual Violence**

Through the focus groups and the needs assessment survey, FLERC determined that departments were quite concerned about domestic and sexual violence. In response to this concern, FLERC sought and was awarded (in May of 1996) two VAWA contracts by the Governor's Task Force on Domestic and Sexual Violence. One project was to develop model policies for the law enforcement responses to domestic and sexual violence. Law enforcement personnel, victim service providers and academics with experience in these areas were identified and appointed to either a project steering committee or task force. The steering committee identified components to be addressed in the policies and oversaw and approved the work of the task force. The task force reviewed existing policies, wrote initial policy drafts and incorporated feedback obtained from law enforcement agencies, other criminal justice entities and service providers into the final drafts. Work was completed on this project in March 1997.

The second project was to design evaluations of law enforcement training in the areas of domestic and sexual violence. This project resulted in a proposal to the Governor's Task Force on Domestic and Sexual Violence to evaluate law enforcement training throughout the state in these areas.

These two projects enhanced the credibility of FLERC not only within law enforcement circles but among persons in other organizations involved in the process including: Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association, Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Florida Council of Sexual Abuse Services, the Florida Network of Victim/Witness Services, Florida Criminal Justice Training Center Directors Association, and the Florida Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Training.

The enhanced FLERC reputation led to two subsequent VAWA grants to (1) promulgate the model policies and provide training in those policies around the state, and, subsequently (2) to modify and update those policies and continue training around the state. Both of those projects also involved the development and dissemination of model policy "reference cards" for line officers which summarized the key elements of each policy and provided local contact numbers (e.g., for the local domestic violence shelters, sexual assault services). The second of these projects is still underway.

## Information Clearinghouse

Because of the reputation achieved by FLERC through its projects, it became an information clearinghouse for law enforcement. FLERC received and responded to calls from agencies on a regular basis. Many of the requests were for research literature pertaining to specific topics, such as the impact of shift schedules or the evaluation results for various types of initiatives. FLERC would provide references or articles/reports on the specified topics. Others pertained to specific types of programs such as gang initiatives and domestic violence units. We would provide references or articles/reports or identify other agencies that had such programs and link the requestor to contact persons in those agencies. Still others were inquiries related to policies to which we would respond with copies of model policies (e.g., those of IACP or other groups) and/or, again, link the requestor with agencies which had recently gone through the process of evaluating and modifying their own policies.

## Other Activities

Other FLERC activities included:

- Working with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) to assist FLETC in curriculum development, needs assessments, evaluation research, and other selected topics;
- Working with the St. Petersburg Community Policing Training Institute to conduct research designed to produce state-of-the-art training for supervisors in a community policing environment;
- Conducting, with Westat, a process evaluation of the Police Corps program, with support from NIJ;
- Conducting, with NIJ support, an outcome evaluation of the New York Police Corps;
- With funds from the U.S. Department of State, developing an exchange program involving Florida law enforcement practitioners and researchers and comparable professionals in the Czech Republic; and
- Also with State Department support, initiating a domestic violence training program for criminal justice officials in the Kyrgyz Republic.

## VI. CHALLENGES

There were several challenges associated with the development of FLERC. Most basic was that of establishing and maintaining good working relationships between the law enforcement agencies and researchers. Each group has some negative perceptions about the other: researchers are viewed as too theoretical and out of touch with reality and law enforcement personnel are seen as unheeding of research findings. In presentations about FLERC, these viewpoints have been acknowledged but the emphasis has been on the potential value of a true collaboration between law enforcement officers and researchers. This was deemed a good selling point to both groups: law enforcement would benefit from the knowledge generated



from research projects they identified as necessary and helped to develop; researchers would obtain the cooperation of law enforcement departments in their research and see their work put into practice.

Another concern stemmed from the varying, sometimes competing, interests of county and municipal law enforcement agencies in Florida. FLERC personnel made a conscious effort to avoid being seen as favoring or slighting either the police agencies or sheriffs departments. Consequently, the sheriffs and police have received equivalent treatment throughout the development and activities of FLERC. Both the Florida Sheriffs Association and the Florida Police Chiefs Association have representatives on the FLERC advisory board and the two representatives of these agencies serve as co-chairs of the board. The two associations receive equal prominence in promotional materials and are equally represented at all FLERC meetings and other functions. This equivalent treatment is even reflected in the color scheme (of "police blue" and "sheriff green") on the FLERC logo and other materials.

FLERC personnel have attempted to keep informed of the roles and activities of the various law enforcement agencies (e.g., Florida Department of Law Enforcement) and associations (e.g., Sheriffs Association) to avoid developing new projects which would overlap with existing ones. Not only do we want to avoid duplicate efforts, but more importantly, we want to avoid the inadvertent FLERC intrusion into the "territories" of our constituency agencies. Further, with any and all FLERC projects, we attempt to collaborate with any law enforcement agencies with interest or expertise in the activity.

Two university-related concerns were identified. First, although Florida State University was the only academic institution involved in the development of FLERC, the participation of researchers from universities and programs throughout the state was considered both desirable and necessary. To ensure this widespread participation, researchers from other universities were informed of FLERC and invited to join in projects (see above). Some academics at these other institutions were suspicious of the motives of the FLERC staff. That is, these persons were curious as to why FSU professors would want to share research ideas and opportunities with them, and were originally reticent about sharing their ideas with us. These concerns abated over time as the academics were included in activities and discussions and were invited to form collaborations.

Secondly, both the College of Social Sciences and the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University were instrumental in the creation of FLERC. To avoid competition between them, they have been given equal representation on the FLERC advisory board, and equal prominence in promotional materials.

## **VII. THE VIABILITY OF THE MODEL AND THE FUTURE OF FLERC**

FLERC was the only Local Initiated Research Partnership to attempt to facilitate research-agency collaborations on a state-wide level. The viability of this model for

other states is reflected by the enthusiastic reception of FLERC by both law enforcement and researchers and FLERC's success in developing those collaborations. In the course of achieving its original objectives, it became clear that this model has the potential to improve the law enforcement profession in a number of ways; that is, FLERC staff acknowledged that collaborations between agencies and academics could and should extend beyond research to activities such as policy development, curriculum development, and training.

Even though NIJ funding has come to an end, and the FLERC directors have moved from Florida, the legacy and promise of FLERC endure. The Homepage continues to be a valuable resource for both practitioners and scholars. Requests for research collaborations and information continue to be received. Law enforcement officials and researchers in several other states have expressed interest in creating their own versions of FLERC. As a final indication of the viability of broad scale collaboration between researchers and law enforcement practitioners, the Police Executive Research Forum in collaboration with five major research universities, is attempting to secure funding for a national project to facilitate research collaborations, drawing from the strengths of the FLERC concept.