

Winter 1960

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### Recommended Citation

Theodore H. Lang, Role of Central Personnel Agency in Police Personnel Problems, 51 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 471 (1960-1961)

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# ROLE OF CENTRAL PERSONNEL AGENCY IN POLICE PERSONNEL PROBLEMS\*

THEODORE H. LANG

Theodore H. Lang, Ph.D. is Acting Personnel Director, New York City Department of Personnel. Dr. Lang has been associated with this department since 1954 and prior to that time had had extensive personnel responsibilities with the New York City Board of Education. He is a lecturer in personnel administration, New York University, is a past-president of the Metropolitan Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration, and is active in other professional organizations.—  
EDRROR.

The quality of police services provided for a community is significantly affected by the staff services rendered to the police agency by the central personnel agency in the jurisdiction. For the purpose of mutual understanding a government central personnel agency might be defined at this stage. The traditional role of civil service commissions throughout the country has been directed at impartially selecting the best qualified employees for government service. In many jurisdictions this same function, together with related personnel services, such as recruitment, classification, training, personnel research, and safety services, is now performed by an agency variously known as the civil service commission, the department of personnel, the personnel board, or other similar name. The term "central personnel agency" thus refers to the governmental agency, however known, which provides staff services of a personnel nature to the line or operating agencies.

This relationship is becoming even more important today in view of the growing professionalization of police work. It is perfectly comprehensible, and even to be expected, that some police administrators should believe that police personnel and selection services would be more effective if fully controlled by the police agency itself. It is against this background that the philosophy and practice of the New York City Department of Personnel is presented as representing, in our view, a reasonable and progressive relationship between two key agencies of municipal government which will best serve the public interest.

\* This article was prepared with the assistance of Harry Reiner, Chief of Law Enforcement Examinations, and Charles J. Setzer, Personnel Examiner, New York City Department of Personnel, and describes the positive personnel policy of the Department of Personnel, headed by City Personnel Director Joseph Schechter, recently deceased, with particular emphasis on the recruitment, examining, and promotion phases of the personnel program.

The role of the central personnel agency in police personnel problems is not greatly different from its role in relation to the personnel problems of any other governmental service such as fire, transportation, or water supply. To understand this role fully, it is necessary to consider an important change in the prevailing concept of the function of civil service administration in this country. Although civil service commissions were originally primarily regulatory as a means of fighting the "spoils system", a strong trend has developed in the past decade toward a de-emphasis of the *regulatory* function and a more positive *service* approach towards the personnel needs of operating agencies.

The overly-legalistic and overly-independent central agencies of fifty years ago have gradually given way to central personnel agencies headed by personnel directors or personnel commissioners directly responsible to mayors and governors. This has brought personnel management back into the mainstream of government and has paralleled a developing emphasis on improved recruitment and selection and the provision of new personnel services such as training, safety, performance evaluation, and incentive programs.

## NEED FOR CENTRAL CONTROL IN EXAMINING FOR APPOINTMENT AND PROMOTION

Despite the change in emphasis, today's central agency must be careful not to relinquish its regulatory function too quickly in its rush to provide operating agencies with effective services. There remains substantial justification for regarding some regulation as a necessary function of a central personnel agency.

The history of local police systems in the United States, as well as the history of municipal government in general, has not been one of consistent integrity. On the contrary, the historical view of local law enforcement in the United States reveals

a rather inconstant morality. There have also been some instances of corruption and dishonesty in central agencies in the history of the civil service movement. However, from the simple fact that the central personnel agency is set apart from the line agency, and is free from control by the line agency head, one can be more certain that issues are decided and policies are established on the basis of the objective facts involved in a situation. Under such circumstances, the effect of favoritism or partiality of an operating department is significantly lessened. It is realistic to assume that if the central personnel agency were eliminated, systems of favoritism would develop rapidly in departments where they are now weak or non-existent.

The public and the staffs of government agencies have greater confidence in a merit system conducted by a central personnel agency. This is generally true even if the line agency operates with integrity. In New York City, there is a geographically concentrated, sophisticated and highly vocal candidate population whose views, protests, and appeals are listened to by the central agency. The carefully defined examination security and appeals procedures are consistent with the clearly expressed desires of our candidates for an objective system with the central agency having independent control. The delegation of the examining function to the line agencies would not be justified in New York City and would be generally resisted by the public.

This particular issue was a subject of discussion in 1957 by the New York City Personnel Council, which is comprised of the personnel directors of all departments of the city government. There resulted a clear and very strong majority opinion that operating agencies should not be and do not want to be involved in the conduct or control of examinations, although they recommended much greater participation by the operating agency *in an advisory role*. Thus, we find there is a demand for the objectivity and disinterestedness of the central personnel agency in the selection process for appointment and promotion in the Civil Service.

#### POSITIVE VALUES PROVIDED BY CENTRAL AGENCY IN RECRUITMENT, EXAMINING, AND PROMOTION

In addition to the objectivity of the central agency, the technical competence necessary for the application of sound selection procedures is more likely to be found among the test specialists of the central agency than among the personnel of an

operating police department. The central agency has a much greater volume of testing work justifying a large staff of test specialists. This concentration of work and staff results in certain values such as: Trend to professionalization in personnel work, higher quality supervision by specialists in the field of psychometrics, the setting aside of time and equipment for research work, better utilization of academic, governmental and professional organization resources, and the better quality of examinations which come from the technical facilities, review systems, and standardized procedures of a huge testing outfit.

A fuller understanding of the role of the central agency may be gained if we examine in some detail the specific services which it provides.

*Recruitment.* This is an area in which specialists of the central agency have the responsibility of developing the overall plan of recruitment. The central agency, which performs recruiting services for many operating departments, can afford to maintain a fulltime staff of recruiting specialists. Contrariwise, line agencies, including the police department, are not expected to have a staff with extensive and technical recruitment training and experience. However, much of the specific information needed in recruitment can be given more precisely and comprehensively by officials of the line agency. Also, their prestige can do much to attract recruits. Therefore, in New York City, the advice and active assistance of the line agency is sought and obtained.

The recruitment for the current Patrolman examination in New York City provides a good example of this cooperative relationship. The general plan of recruitment was established by specialists in our Department of Personnel, in cooperation with Police Department officials, after careful consideration of such factors as special sources of good candidates, the proper use of commercial media of communication (newspapers, radio, television, subway posters), possible cooperation in recruitment efforts with similar efforts of other jurisdictions, specialized approaches which may be needed for particular areas of the community, and a host of other considerations. Once a plan of action was established, the Police Department assisted in effectuating it by making application forms available in each of the local police precincts, by public statements of the Police Commissioner concerning the career benefits and opportunities for public service which await the successful Patrolman candidate,

and by supplying speakers for recruitment purposes for day and evening high schools and for community groups. The contribution of the Police Department was significant; the over-all responsibility remained with the Personnel Department.

*Original Selection.* The central personnel agency provides a wide variety of services in the selection of candidates for original appointment. These services include the establishment of qualifications, the construction and rating of written tests, the establishment of medical and physical standards and tests, the psychiatric screening of candidates, and the investigation of the backgrounds of candidates. These services require a varying degree of cooperation from the line police department.

*Establishment of Qualifications.* In establishing qualifications, the central agency uses its knowledge of, and experience with, similar positions in its own jurisdiction as well as in others. The establishment of realistic qualifications and the avoidance of petty requirements, which only serve to hinder recruitment or which might better be the subject of an operating agency training program, can easily be achieved by the central agency because of its extensive experience with hundreds of other titles. The intensive and specialized experience of the central agency with selection procedures is really one of its major contributions to good personnel management. However, here too the central agency depends on the operating agency to some extent. As in recruitment, the basic information must come from the operating agency. A good working relationship between both agencies will result in the volunteering of information by the operating agency on previously established qualifications, e.g., as to whether they were unnecessarily high for the duties performed or perhaps were not high enough and those selected were unable to perform satisfactorily. This kind of information, supported by facts and figures which have resulted from surveys or analyses, is of critical importance to the central agency.

*Preparation of Written Test.* In the construction of the written test for original appointment, the central agency performs a major service for the operating agency. By providing objective technical competence in test construction, the central agency provides its most valuable service. Even here it is essential, however, to consult with the operating agencies before and after the examination. The central agency should seek information on job duties and should conduct a job analysis in suffi-

cient detail so that a realistic and discriminating test can be constructed. It is also advisable to have an exchange of views with the operating agency on such things as the scope of the test (a general indication of the major subject matter areas to be included), the form of the test (whether essay, multiple-choice, or a combination), and the subjects and weights (whether the examination shall consist of written, oral, or other types of tests and the relative value of each test in the total examination). The operating agency should be given sufficient opportunity to make suggestions along these lines so that the central agency can consider their views before making any final decisions, but the decision-making power in all matters concerning examinations should be retained by the central agency. Following the examination, which is generally made public in New York City, it has been found desirable to confer with operating officials on tentative key answers. Occasionally, these officials will disagree with the central agency on a tentative key answer and be able to support their views by reference to authoritative sources or practices. In such instances, the tentative key answers will be revised. In addition, a general appraisal of every examination by the top operating agency officials is sought and their comments considered with a view to improving the next examination.

*Medical and Physical Standards.* In the establishment of medical and physical standards and the testing for conformance to these standards, the central agency provides a service similar to the one provided in establishing qualifications in general. The central agency should seek and give great weight to the suggestions and views of the operating agencies, but it should properly exercise the final control in setting standards. The extensive background of the central agency in setting medical and physical standards for a variety of titles, as well as the specific needs and experiences of the operating agencies, should complement each other to produce the most desirable product. Further, it is important that there be reasonable relationships among medical standards for Civil Service positions across the board.

*Psychiatric Screening.* There are highly technical problems in the use of psychiatric tests in the selection process. The interpretation of test data or psychiatric diagnosis should be on a consistent and uniformly fair basis no matter which department or title may be involved. This, of course, is interpreted to permit adjustment of psychiatric stand-

ards for different positions in different departments. The central agency is particularly well suited to provide such uniform and fair interpretation in view of its wide experience with job requirements in all types of public service and its staff of technically trained personnel.

In the psychiatric screening of candidates the central agency performs a service which must be approached conservatively, taking into consideration the relatively low validity of personality testing on a mass selection basis. Because of this low validity, caution should be exercised in the use of such test as part of the selection process.<sup>1</sup> That emotional stability and proper personality adjustment are critical factors in police selection is universally accepted. However, many of the tests in current use are not designed primarily for *selection* purposes,<sup>2</sup> and the dependability of brief psychiatric interviews is open to challenge. In New York City, it is generally accepted that the best evidence of stability and adjustment of a candidate is the record of his personal, occupational, social, and military life. Evidence of instability or difficulty of adjustment in any of these areas, leads to consideration of need for psychological or psychiatric examination.

*Investigation.* The investigation of candidates for public employment is another of the services performed by the central agency for the operating agencies. Although the Department of Personnel is responsible for this function for all city departments, in connection with the Police Department and Correction Department uniformed staffs the Police Department itself has been called upon to perform the basic investigation because of its special competence in this work. We have developed a most desirable relationship with the Police Department whereby the actual investigations are conducted by police sergeants, with the interpreta-

tion of the resulting data as well as any decision to accept, reject, or refer for psychiatric processing being the responsibility of the central agency.

*Selection for Promotion.* The role of the central agency in the conduct of a promotion examination is generally similar to its role in original selection. However, there is one major difference: everything stated previously concerning the need for professional competence and objectivity in original selection is greatly intensified due to the much closer competition by candidates who know each other personally and are competing for significant job opportunities. We should not forget that police work represents an attractive career service in government. The argument is sometimes made that the police agency can more effectively prepare promotional tests because of its familiarity and expertness in its own subject matter. However, this advantage is more apparent than real. The central agency may set aside a special unit which becomes expert in police subject matter areas and has the advantage of technical testing competence and the further compelling advantage of objectivity. This objectivity guarantees that selection for promotion will be based on merit and fitness insofar as the examination can determine this element, and will not be affected by partiality or favoritism. The absence of scandal and the general satisfaction of the uniformed staff of the Police Department supports the role of the central personnel agency in the promotion process in New York City.

#### OTHER COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

There is a role for the central agency in personnel areas in which the regulatory function is minimal or non-existent. Some of these are training, safety, performance evaluation, and incentive programs. In these areas, the central agency can provide valuable assistance in stimulating worthwhile programs, locating available community resources, providing inter-agency liaison, providing expert professional help supplementing the staff of the police agency, and evaluating the program. Service is provided in these areas only to the extent desired by the police agency.

In employee training, the contribution of the central agency can be an extremely rich one. Skills and know-how developed to aid all other agencies can certainly be useful to the police agency. The New York City Police Department participates in programs designed to train line agency personnel to develop and lead training conferences. The cen-

<sup>1</sup> DOROTHY C. ADKINS, "Objectives of Public Personnel Selection," *PUBLIC PERSONNEL REVIEW*, April 1959, p. 130 and p. 133.

FREDERICK GEHLMANN, LEONARD W. FERGUSON AND JOHN F. SCOTT, *PERSONALITY TESTS—USES AND LIMITATIONS*, Civil Service Assembly Personnel Report No. 561, pp. 21-22.

DONALD E. SUPER, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CAREERS*, First Edition, pp. 240-241.

HARRY REINER, CHARLES J. SETZER AND JAMES McCORMACK, "Another View on Psychiatric Screening of Police Recruits," *PUBLIC PERSONNEL REVIEW*, January 1960, pp. 41-44.

<sup>2</sup> The almost completely *clinical* orientation of these tests is clearly evident from a review of the many studies of personality tests reported in the most recent *MENTAL MEASUREMENTS YEARBOOK* by Buros.

tral film library is available to the Police Department. Special executive and supervisory training programs have been developed for police officials in cooperation with the City Personnel Department. Direct assistance has been given in developing special agency programs, such as courses to train police officers to speak Spanish. The Police Department representative also participates in the inter-agency training council of the City of New York. The developing relationship in the training field is a model of staff assistance to an operating agency.

In safety also there is much of value which a central personnel agency can contribute to the police agency. The Safety Coordinator of the City of New York is part of the Personnel Department. Through the Safety Coordinator, the Police Department receives educational materials for its staff relating to the use of safety belts, crash helmets, luminous belts for night traffic officers, and numerous other safety devices. Members of the Police Department attend special training programs which have been developed for the safety officers of all departments. (The Police Department is a valued member of the City Safety Coordination Committee.)

In the field of employee incentive programs, the Police Department participates with credit in the City-wide suggestion program, and in special awards programs for outstanding City employees. Members of the Police Department have been honored in these programs, which serve a two-fold

purpose of increasing employee morale and the prestige of public employment. In a cooperative arrangement between the Police Department and the Department of Personnel in the City of New York, special credits toward promotion are granted for outstanding acts or performance.

#### SUMMARY

In brief, the central personnel agency has two major values to offer in the attempt to help solve police personnel problems; namely, professional competence and independent objectivity.

At the present stage of personnel development, the central agency still has a combined *control and service* role to play with respect to selection and promotion, while in other personnel areas the primary role is one of a *service*.

Regardless of the degree of control which is exercised by the central agency in the provision of personnel services, it is most important that the central agency and the operating police agency recognize that both play an essential role in personnel management and that the most effective relationship is one of *partnership* with the primary objective of seeking out and implementing the best ideas and obtaining the highest values in personnel administration. The mutual respect which stems from such a "public interest" orientation is more important to the accomplishment of a good personnel job in a police agency than any preoccupation with delineation of the exact limits of authority.