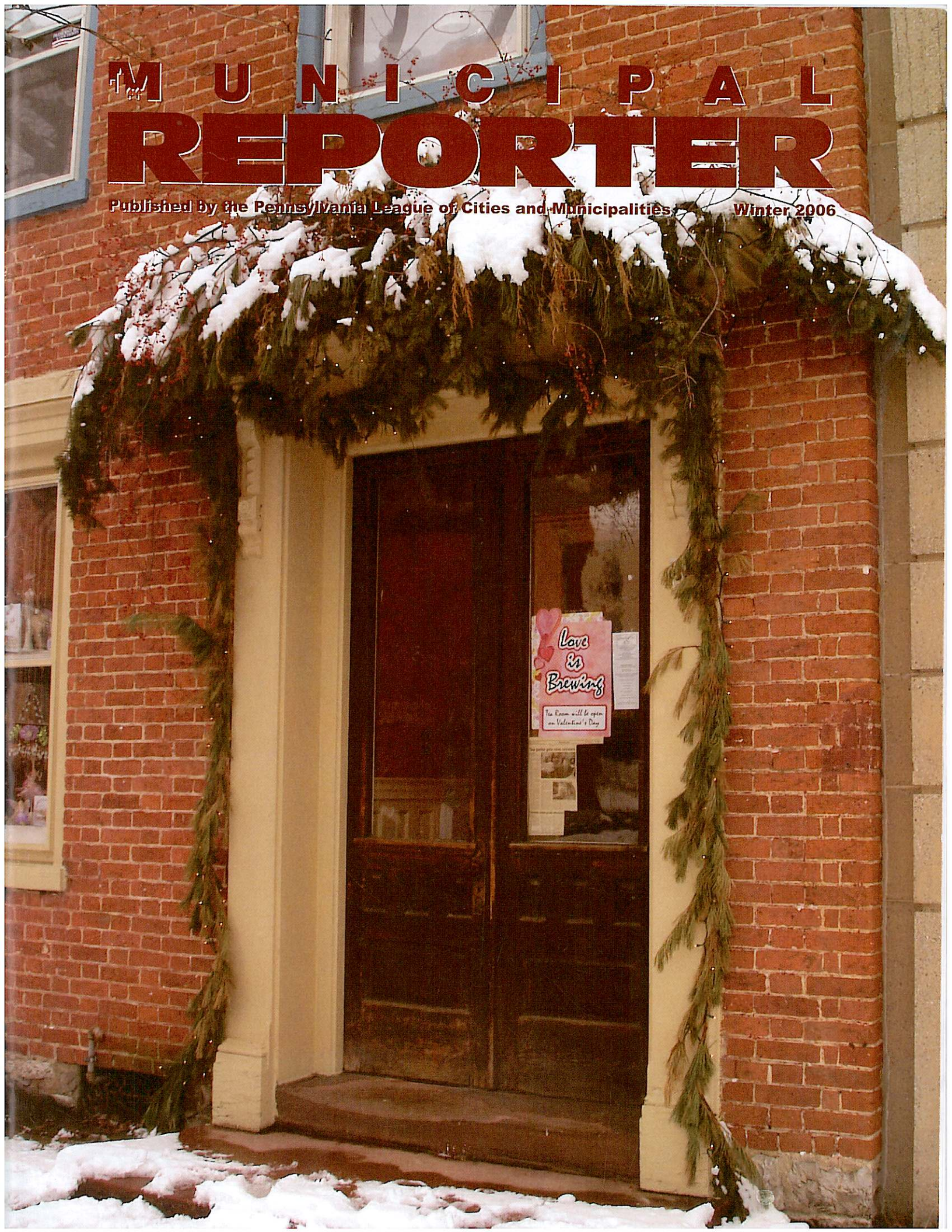


M U N I C I P A L R E P O R T E R

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A Closer Look at Municipal Police Operations

by Peter Marshall

In an effort to provide municipal officials with critical information about operations issues and the tools and innovations available to facilitate them, we asked Peter Marshall, Managing Consultant of Municipal Resources of Pennsylvania, to share with us some benefits gained through the assessment of police operations.

Q: *Why is it important to periodically assess municipal police operations?*

A: I believe it is important to periodically assess or review all major municipal operations. I think this is especially important for police operations. I say this for a number of reasons. Police are expected to deal with a wide variety of situations, including violent encounters. Police exercise a great deal of discretion and authority in handling situations. Because of this, they are especially vulnerable to accusations of officer misconduct and lawsuits. To reduce such suits and accusations, it is important that police departments have in place clear policies and procedures to guide officer responses to higher risk activities. Many departments do not have adequate policies and procedures. Unfortunately, municipal officials, including police officials, may not be aware that their department is deficient. It is also important that police departments provide comprehensive training to insure that policies and procedures are followed on a day-to-day basis.

Q: *Aside from serious liability issues, are there other reasons for police department assessments?*

A: Definitely, yes. It is critical in the operation of a police department, that police officers be scheduled to effectively respond to the demands for police services. Each community varies somewhat in the time-of-day, day-of-week, and months-of-year when demands for police service peak. If personnel are not properly scheduled to meet peak demands, the police service is not as effective as it could be. Scheduling personnel to meet demands is not a simple matter. When scheduling police,

the scheduler must not only consider demands for service, but must also consider police officer morale, health, and effectiveness. All of these things can be significantly influenced by the kind of scheduling that is practiced. For example, did you know that studies have shown that the worst type of scheduling for police officers is short rotating shifts that rotate backward – that is from afternoon to night, night to day, etc.? Schedules with short backward rotations are very hard on police officers.

Q: *Are there other important reasons to assess police operations?*

A: Police recruitment, hiring, training, and retention, are the life blood of a good police department. If these things are not done correctly and the wrong people are recruited and hired, or the best available candidate is not promoted, the department and the municipality suffer. It can take years to correct mistakes in hiring or promotion. It is also important that a police department have a meaningful performance evaluation system. Without a good system, it is difficult to reward good performance and penalize poor performance. A good performance evaluation system allows a municipality to hold its employees accountable for their work. In the long run, there is nothing that is more discouraging to a good worker than the knowledge that the municipality places no value on excellent work, and that poor performance goes unchallenged.

Q: *What part does citizen satisfaction play in all of this?*

A: One mark of a good police department is how they value citizen input and citizen satisfaction. For example, an assessment should evaluate how citizen complaints are handled. Are complaints professionally investigated and honestly dealt with, or are they given lip service and forgotten? If a police officer violates proper procedures, what steps are taken to assure it does not happen again? Citizen complaints must be handled in a transparent

manner. There should be a clear record of the complaint, the investigation, and the result. All municipal services exist for the citizens, and that understanding should be an absolute part of the culture of municipal employment. The municipality has an obligation to insure that this message is understood and embraced by its employees. This takes time and training, but it is worth the effort.

Good police departments don't just happen. Properly managing the police function is complex and difficult. It takes an in-depth knowledge of the police operations and a clear understanding of the role of police in our society. The assessment of municipal operations – especially police operations – is a management tool that should be used by all municipal officials responsible for providing effective municipal services to their citizens.

Peter Marshall has held management positions in Pennsylvania (State College, Hermitage), Delaware, and Michigan. He has participated in municipal exchange projects in England, Japan, and Australia. Stateside, he has held faculty posts in public policy and administration at the University of Delaware and the Pennsylvania State University. Mr. Marshall currently serves as Managing Consultant of Municipal Resources of Pennsylvania, a municipal consulting firm. He can be reached at pmarshall@municipalresources.com or by calling (800) 922-8063.

We welcome your comments and suggestions about this article, as well as topics of interest for future segments.