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A Law Enforcement Sharing Story

by Jim Chrisinger



Sharing facilities and functions across jurisdictional lines sounds to outsiders like a no brainer. Why isn't there more of it? What makes it hard? What makes it work? Conversations with four of the principals who launched Coconino County and Flagstaff, Arizona's decade of success provide some insights.

By the late 1990s, the Flagstaff, Arizona, police department had outgrown its building. At the same time, the Coconino County sheriff's operation was contemplating new facilities. Arizona had mandated that sheriff departments manage jails, so cities got away from housing them, which meant that counties charged cities, including Flagstaff, for housing prisoners. As a result, cities and counties sometimes found themselves in conflict.

The Coconino County sheriff at that time, Joe Richards, recalls that there were lots of disputes about the ways that "prisoner days" were calculated for payment. It led to unhappiness on both sides. Richards was managing the local jail, and it wasn't all fun and games for him either. He didn't have enough space and had to move inmates elsewhere and pay these moving costs from his department's budget.

Richards was also dealing with long-standing lawsuits relating to the county jail. The jail was under court order, and prisoners were filing class actions, complaining of lack of exercise, poor nutrition, inadequate ventilation, and more. These lawsuits had tied up the county legislative system for years. Richards says he felt like he wore out several cars going back and forth to federal court in Phoenix. He also remembers thinking that something else had to be done.

So, the voters approved a jail district and a funding stream to go with it. But that raised the question of whether building a new jail but leaving the sheriff's administrative department in the old location was a good idea. New tax money could be used only for a jail, not administrative functions.

Solutions were needed. The city council and board of supervisors began talking about sharing one law enforcement building, including a jail. Some of the early conversations ranged even more broadly, beyond the police and sheriff to include pre-trial services, juvenile detention, probation, the juvenile court, courts, district attorney, and court administration.



Joint police-sheriff building, Flagstaff, Arizona.

It didn't go that far. Some of these entities were already remodeling their facilities or were satisfied with what they had. And getting enough land and money to collocate them all seemed too much.

Elected officials for the city and county swung in solidly behind a sharing initiative. In addition to facility

needs, they also realized that communications and computers were antiquated. They knew that substantial funds would have to be spent, and they saw another opportunity to save money.

Officials approached the chief of police and sheriff with their idea. "No way," was the initial and unanimous response from both staffs. The spirit between police and sheriff was "us versus them" and "yours versus mine." Law enforcement sounded like gang territory, marked by turf, language, and even colors, in this case brown and blue.

Cathy Allen, then and still commander, administrative and support services for the sheriff's department, remembers, "We fought it as hard as we could. We brought all our best arguments, the best our minds could muster." Flagstaff's police, for example, are paid more than county deputies, so people said they couldn't be put under the same roof, sitting side by side, with police officers making larger salaries.

The cultures of the two operations also are different. The police tend to be quick, reactive, even proactive; giving tickets and tolerating less nonsense. The sheriff's office tends toward more long-term problem solving, longer response times, efforts to solve the underlying problem, and looking beyond and taking the troublemaker off the street. There are different cultures and different expectations, both internally and from the community.

After listening to all these good objections, the county board and city council decided that it should be done anyway. At the time, the sheriff's department and the police department were housed three blocks apart, and staff members rarely talked with each other or even saw each other.

Prophetic in light of what would come, then chief of police J. T. McCann remembers that the board and council's unwavering commitment made it easier for everyone. The two organizations didn't have to sell the idea to themselves. Ultimately, the two sides agreed and then asked staff members to make it work.

PERSISTENCE AND PATIENCE

One thing working for the initiative from the start was the mutual respect and trust between Sheriff Richards and Chief McCann. They were already friends, but Richards remembers "that respect was the foundation. We were both willing to say, 'let's make it work.'"

Initially there were lots of questions and possibilities, many scary. Shared employees? People from different employers serving in the same function as dispatch? They hadn't gone there before. Employees learned from visiting other departments. Bob White, who was then the deputy chief, recalled: "We visited Huntsville, Alabama, where fire, police, and emergency response were all collocated in dispatch. We saw bad feelings created when some staff members were real busy but police and others sat around with their feet up. These differences are inherent in the nature of police and fire."

Then there was talk about creating a governing district, but that option was rejected. It just adds another layer.

After initially grumbling, some leaders and staff in both organizations began to see potential. Many services like communications, records, and warrants could be shared, and they could be done in shared facilities. Others picked up on the idea of a one-stop shop for the public. And 911 could be consolidated.

White also saw how technology could make it easier. The city was already tied in with Northern Arizona University (NAU) by shared computer, automated dispatch, and radio. So there was some experience with sharing.

Planning started two years out. Leadership established transition teams for every aspect. For example, sheriff and police each had their own codes for dispatch, called ten codes. Many codes overlapped but not all. Allen remembers the effort to get everyone on the same page. "It took some give and take. It was painful. Both sides said, 'We'll keep ours; you can just use ours.'" Believe it or not, these negotiations even extended to things like one-ply or two-ply toilet paper. "Everything had to be discussed."

There were other things: How many parking spaces? Who gets charged for what? One question that created lots of difficulty was "Who has the authority?" Most important, people immediately jumped to, "What will happen to me and my job? Do I want to work for *them*?"

One momentum builder was buying a shared computer system. Allen explains: "Once we were into that procurement, no one could take their toys and go home. We might have done that. We might have put a wall in the middle of the new building and quit. But once we were buying a computer system together, we were forced to go ahead."

But getting to the shared computer system was no piece of cake either. At first, the conversations were about "my data" and "your data." Then the talk moved to segregated data vs. all the data together. Allen describes what happened next: "We couldn't agree. We went back to the chief and sheriff for them to decide. They didn't decide. They said, 'Make it work.' So we did. We landed on data together."

Eventually, the teams arrived on sharing in five major areas, in addition to sharing a new building. For two services, dispatch and records, they decided that the city would take the lead, and the county would pay fees based on its use. The county would take the lead on three other services: IT (computers, telephone, and some radio); maintenance and custodial for facilities; and warrants for arrest, protection, and extradition. For these services, the city would pay fees per their use. Contracts document each of these five services. Joint oversight also continues for some services like records.

Which entity ended up with which services was a pragmatic decision; in each case, it simply made more sense for one to do it. The city had more business, records, and transactional activity, so it made sense for the police to take care of records. The county had more facilities, including the most square footage, so it made sense for the sheriff to be responsible for facilities. The city preferred that the county handle warrants because of liability issues. The county had the majority of IT users.

Rates and payments continue to be worked out. Most are calculated on a percentage basis—percentages of total transactions, calls for service, records, square feet maintained, and numbers of IT users. Still, some payments feel more fair than others. Some argue now, for example, that because the city has more funding for projects and therefore uses more IT resources, the allocation doesn't feel quite right yet.

Most of the sharing agreements have been committed to paper, according to Allen, "as much as we can," by contracts or intergovernmental agreements. Still many handshake agreements have emerged because of immediate needs. Allen feels a bit of nervousness if someone leaves. "We know we need to get more on paper." But she adds, "As we enter into agreements, we want to be specific but also preserve flexibility."

After they committed and started joint venture activities, day-to-day operations found themselves "way ahead of the actual interagency agreements," McCann recalls. "We were doing it before the paperwork was done." The new facility did have to jump the usual hoops, for example, the political and neighborhood ramifications of siting a new facility. One concern: would it be too close to a school?

Different funding sources for different aspects of the facility also complicated things. They worked through them. McCann compliments the support staff who did a great job securing and managing grants; one example is the new software for dispatch.

One thing that helped the transition of dispatch from sheriff to the city was that the city gave arriving county staff members higher pay, often up to \$8,000 more, because the city's pay scales are generally higher. Pay differentials between operations employees still exist, and because of different funding mechanisms the county can't catch up.

Leadership found more ways to ease transitions. Employees could jump to the other jurisdiction and bring all their seniority, sick time, and vacation with them. Both jurisdictions were already on the same insurance plan, which also helped.

Because typical city pay was higher, employees didn't move the other way. One county person, however, said no to working for the city even though she would have received a \$10,000 raise. Many factors weighed in individual decisions, including family, friends, and even dating relationships.

CULTURE CHANGE

The largest barriers were mistrust and suspicion—human nature—and the workplace cultures of both organizations. People kept wondering, "What am I going to lose?" They were not asking "What can I gain?" People pushed back with "Why are we doing this?" Just exploring the possibilities was perceived as criticism.

Bob White recalls that the tech part was easy, the human part was difficult. "In hindsight, I could have

been more sensitive to people's feelings. Frankly, it's easier to just deal with the bad guys on the street," he said.

In the midst of this kind of change, the participants warn, watch out for blaming change. McCann notes, for example, that there were issues between operations and dispatch. "But that happens anyway. It happened here, but that's not because of the merger."

McCann remembers, "Initially, some just didn't want to do it, especially in lower ranks and in administration. They strongly felt the differences between the two organizations' philosophies and ways of working. We had to be persistent and keep up the effort to make it work. We had to keep meeting, assure people they would not lose their identity. There are still two organizations. We've stayed independent, but that was not the perception at the time. People were fearful. And now people say it's the best thing we ever did."

The former sheriff, Joe Richards, points out too that almost everywhere there are historical animosities based on old stories: back when "so and so did such and such to so and so." Those stories take on a life of their own and give the players in situations like this additional ammunition for why something won't work. Similarly, "local papers love to stir up controversy," Richards adds. "If they can paint winners and losers, they will. The dollars are an area where they will especially try to do this. So the two organizations have to honestly assess the dollars and efficiencies."

Allen recalls, "We did some things to foster familiarity and build trust. We held building-wide cookouts. We used some design features, like placing coffee machines and vending machines to force people to walk over to the 'other side.' We co-invited folks from both sides to the same training. We still take advantage of opportunities to promote interaction and strengthen relationships."

White observes, "It proved easier for transplants to town to ask the hard questions about why we need to keep all these entities. That's the nature of change. The longer you've been there, the worse it usually is."

To overcome these challenges, leadership and staff had to be direct. They had to say, "This is how it will be." Some employees tried to sabotage and later even admitted it. A few people did their best to be antagonistic. "Officers in the field know how to be nasty with dispatch," White remembers. "We worked through it with conversation, conversation, conversation."

McCann remembers that it took endless meetings: "People felt threatened by change. We listened and listened, meeting after meeting. At all levels, in all units. . . . Each level had its own concerns. So we needed good representatives from each level to get it done."

Neither jurisdiction brought in outside help to support change management. They did it themselves.

McCann also remembers that what made it work was everyone deciding to accomplish it. Staff had to get beyond the fear of losing identity. Once agreements were ironed out, lower-ranking troops got with the program. All four people interviewed for this article emphasized that it took many, many people in both organizations to make the sharing work. And many did step up to do what was needed.

There was more to leadership's strategy. Leadership promised employees that it would do its best to avoid job losses. McCann is proud that layoffs were avoided. Anyone who was displaced got a comparable position somewhere else. Cuts were timed to avoid layoffs. Offers were made to people to change jobs, but no one was forced to change jobs.

In one case, someone didn't want to go to the other jurisdiction, and there was nothing available in the old department, so she ended up at city hall. No one lost a job; but some changed jobs. McCann emphasizes the importance of making some concessions as you do this. If there was a question of whether a position somewhere else was comparable, the benefit of the doubt was given. Credentials were accepted.

McCann also observes that change scares people, and some personalities were problematic. But everyone got better facilities and people appreciated that.

PAYOFF

The biggest benefit, beyond the joint building, was ending duplication in the merged services. In other cases, where the two entities had not had parallel

Learning

What can be learned a decade later from this

units, they readily reached agreement on which entity would go forward with the unit both would employ. Thus, the county would handle search and rescue, the city the SWAT team. Some city employees joined search and rescue, just as some deputies joined the SWAT team. The two were not co-owned, but citizens got a better deal with the two.

Before the sharing arrangement, each side had called on the other's unit when needed. But each side had perceived that members of the other unit came only if they had time and it worked for them to come when called. Since colocating, the thought process has been different. Now there is more support for each other. The two jurisdictions also now form joint investigation teams. Another benefit, according to White, is that now there is real interoperability. Deputies can converse car to car with city officers and Arizona state highway patrol officers.

White also cited another benefit of technology system changes: success in the radio room. "We can now move quickly to a command post. It's seamless."

McCann cites "greater closeness, more harmony." The city was already conducting a citizens' police academy—a series of Thursday night classes and some Saturdays. That led to a joint academy with the sheriff as well as a program to train neighbors to be self-sufficient for 72 hours.

northern Arizona experiment of shared services?

- Start with committed leaders pursuing a shared vision. The city council, county board of supervisors, sheriff, and police chief were steadfast in pursuit of a shared vision. They kept their eyes on the greater good: better service and efficiency for the residents and taxpayers.
- Timing matters. Contiguous jurisdictions needing similar facilities and other expensive stuff at the same time boosts the impetus for sharing.
- Be prepared to overcome barriers. J. T. McCann notes: "Some said we couldn't mix blue and brown. Don't be so turf conscious. Lead with the mission. Local policies and procedures vary, but those are not what's most important."
- Find the win-win. "This won't work if one side feels like they're getting screwed," Richards advises. "You have to look honestly at the advantages and disadvantages. No surprises."
- Keep people front and center. Bob White notes: "Don't underestimate the human side. I did. Validate people's feelings. If you don't, nothing else you say will be heard."

AND THE COST SAVINGS?

The Coconino-Flagstaff sharing venture clearly worked. It did what its instigators wanted it to do. But how much money did it save? No one really knows.

Initially, of course, there were substantial outlays. The county and city were replacing buildings and buying state-of-the-art equipment. But what would it have cost for both jurisdictions to build or upgrade facilities and purchase needed equipment? And to purchase land, which is expensive in Flagstaff? When the county purchased an old lumber mill property for the joint facility, that saved money.

Participants agree that there were also other savings and efficiencies. The county, for example, had a graveyard-shift dispatcher who was actually needed only 30 to 40 percent of the time. Now one graveyard dispatcher is shared. More broadly, both departments can supplement and fill staffing gaps for each other. They also take advantage of grant application opportunities by collaboration.

Other savings were achieved through economies of scale. Before sharing began, police radios needed upgrading. Dispatch was being modernized and upgraded. The sheriff's radios were antiquated. Joint acquisition saved money, reduced duplication, and everyone got better equipment. NAU's involvement meant that the city and county could use its 800 megahertz system, so the city and county didn't have to get their own. That also saved money.

After a decade, a few sources of tension still exist. City and county counterparts often sit and work in the same room. Police are still paid more, and some still ask, "How is that okay?" One might expect poaching of high performers by the city. But that seems not to happen. When asked why, Allen notes that "the jobs may be functionally similar, but they are also different. We still have different cultures and different expectations by the community." There are still issues to address each month, and these are taken up at colocation meetings.

When asked whether they would go back to the way things were before, the four principals are unanimous: no! What they have now is better, they agree, better for the people of Flagstaff and

Coconino County and better for the sheriff and police.

But could it be undone? Since the sharing was initially completed, there has been a complete turnover: new chief, new sheriff, and new council. So far, no one has made noise about going back.

Reflecting on the transformational change he saw, White suggests that the increased pace of change in our society means that things like this may be easier to do in the future. "I train around the country these days," he notes. "There's a real generational difference. The new generation is more accustomed to change; they're more up with it. The hardest transition is for those who've been in their jobs the longest."

Cathy Allen sums up the experience: "This was the most challenging thing I've done in my career. It's also the thing I'm most proud of because of its benefits to the community."

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