

Why Quality Control is So Important in Police Records Units



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policerecordsmanagement.com

“No Records Clerk is going to tell me how to write a report!” That’s what one sergeant recently said to me during a records management assessment I was conducting for the agency. Resisting the temptation to respond in-kind, open mouth and insert foot, I paused and respectfully began to educate.

Unfortunately this mind set is all too common in our profession. If your agency does **not** have this cultural mindset, you’re blessed. If it does, let’s go over some solutions.

Police officers ([which I once was](#)) are generally unaware of the requirements surrounding police/public records and crime reporting regulations. Unfortunately, most academies don’t teach, not even just one hour, the fact that there are laws governing what can and cannot be released to the public and that there are rules for reporting crime statistics. Officers often don’t know about or appreciate the level of work that is required to make sure the reporting officer, the parties involved in the report, the public and the department itself are getting the right information into the right hands at the right time.

Don’t get me wrong; there are many agencies who do take this function very seriously and have done a fantastic job of instilling the importance of producing good, quality police reports. To the many records managers I have met in my trainings that work daily to achieve this high standard- my hat’s off to you!



“Information is the lifeblood of the agency – if it’s mismanaged in any way, you’re going to experience a catastrophe eventually”- Ed Cloughton

[Houston Chronicle May, 31 2014](#)

All too often however I hear of agencies that have either directed their records personnel to not read or correct reports containing errors or maintain procedures designed to “protect” the officer from being bothered by report corrections, believing they have more important things to deal with. To them I say “then expect to read about your agency in the headlines someday”, and not in a good way.

The primary goal that every agency should build into the fabric of its records management function is to ensure that all documentation is **1) accurate 2) well-written and 3) error-free.**

Information is the lifeblood of any organization but when the organization is dealing with the protection of life and liberty its proper management becomes really important. The information management lifecycle includes 6 stages: creation, collection, processing, maintenance, dissemination and disposition. If there is a breakdown in any of these, the information can be spoiled, lost or improperly changed, the results of which can be catastrophic for a police department.

In order to achieve a thorough quality control program the department must send the message at every level that it will not accept poorly written reports and that records personnel will in fact correct or reject reports containing mistakes. Furthermore, quality control means ensuring there are no other “clerical” errors in report processing. A case in point which says it all...

South Carolina Church Shooting

On June 17, 2015 a mass shooting occurred at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing 9 church members. The shooter, Dylann Roof, used a gun he should not have been able to purchase because of his arrest history. Due to a series of clerical errors made during the processing of that local arrest report and the background check done by the FBI for the purchase of the gun, he was able to buy it and kill 9 innocent Christians driven by racial hatred.

According to [this article by Reuters](#):

Dylann Roof, 21, was arrested by a Columbia Police Department officer on a drug charge and jailed on Feb. 28, 2015 but a clerk wrongly listed the county sheriff's office as the arresting agency, the Lexington County sheriff's office said in a statement Monday.

Two days later a county official corrected the name of the arresting agency - but only internally - to list the Columbia Police Department, Lexington County Sheriff Jay Koon said in a statement Monday.

However, that correct information never entered a database used by the FBI. In mid-April when a Federal Bureau of Investigations examiner conducted a federal background check for Roof's pending purchase of a gun - the weapon now believed to have been used in the church murders - the FBI found Roof's incorrect arrest information and mistakenly contacted the Lexington County records division.

"A records employee advised the FBI that the Columbia Police Department was the arresting agency," Lexington County Sheriff Jay Koon, said in a statement on Monday.

The examiner made several calls trying to find the correct information but never tracked down the Columbia Police Department report in which Roof admitted to drug possession after being arrested at a local mall, the FBI said last week.

That would have barred Roof from buying the weapon, FBI Director James Comey told reporters at a briefing Friday.

Anyone in law enforcement who believes that records management personnel shouldn't read reports or that they should only “shuffle paper”, and implements protocols to that effect, is placing their department in a position of significant liability.

Unfortunately there are many in the profession who think this way. Take for example the following email I recently received:

7/17/2015

Workspace Webmail :: Print

----- Original Message -----

Subject: Function of a Police Records Unit

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Tue, June 30, 2015 12:23 pm

To: "ed@policerecordsmanagement.com" <ed@policerecordsmanagement.com>

Hi Ed,

By chance, do you have a documented resource that defines what the specific roll of a police records section is? Or would you be willing to send me a brief paragraph in your own words? We have been told that our section only "pushes paper" and we shouldn't "read reports," and not to worry about what goes out of Records. "If it is bad or incorrect, it is a reflection of the officer."

I know I have a long road ahead of me, however my first objective is to explain to my Chief exactly what our role is as a unit. Unfortunately he needs "documentation" that isn't from me.

Thank you for any information you can provide to me. It really is beneficial to be able contact you and use your knowledge.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
Records Supervisor
[REDACTED] Police Department
[REDACTED] - office
[REDACTED] - desk
[REDACTED].[com](mailto:ed@policerecordsmanagement.com)

At the root of the quality control program is having procedures in place which ensure records are thoroughly reviewed by a supervisor and then by records personnel, that other information such as teletype entries and scanned records are checked for accuracy and completeness, and regular audits are conducted to measure compliance.

When mistakes are made in these areas innocent people can be incorrectly listed as having an arrest history, vehicles can be listed as stolen when in fact they have been recovered and driven by the rightful owner, and expunged records can be erroneously revealed.

Below are 3 steps to help develop a quality control program in your agency:

Step One: Educate and Raise Awareness

Training, training, training. The model I developed, now in place at many U.S. police agencies, as provided in our Building a Model Police Records Unit seminar, is one which includes a strong emphasis on developing an internal training program for agency personnel in the areas of 1) records management 2) public records law and 3) UCR/NIBRS. Additionally, raising awareness to the function of the records unit and the importance of quality control should be accomplished through regular meetings, dissemination of training briefs and having a sound records management policy.

The Department of Justice has published a guide titled “Information Quality: The Foundation for Justice Decision Making” which can be found here: [9 Elements of an Information Quality Program](#).

Step Two: Perform an Assessment

Knowing and carrying out the 4 pillars of a police records management program, also provided for in our seminars, which include 1) sound business processes 2) people’s performance 3) compliance and 4) technology, is the key to success. But first, a comprehensive assessment must be conducted of the agency’s records management operations. Here is some guidance: [Information Quality Self-Assessment Tool](#).

Step Three: Develop Policy and an Agency-wide Program

From the records management assessment an agency-wide program can be developed designed to get everyone on the same page and in compliance with the information lifecycle. Each step of the lifecycle is governed by state law and departmental policy. It includes: creation, collection, processing, maintenance, dissemination and disposition. Here is an [Information Quality Program Guide](#) to provide some assistance.

While these steps require time and energy, having a records management program is required by law in most states. What happened in Charleston is a testament to the importance of records management and PRI specializes in providing services which free up your time and ensure your agency is in compliance.

Lastly, here is one other resource you can share with your staff to demonstrate that in fact “Records” should be reviewing reports and, so much more. Page. 7 of this guide explicitly describes the role Records plays in the review of police reports. This [FBI published guide](#) begins by stating:

“The need for good record-keeping and information-sharing practices has taken on added significance in today’s global environment. Not only do good records provide crucial internal information (i.e., business operations and case management support—not to mention the official memory of an agency’s investigations), law enforcement agencies now need to communicate agency-to-agency and across continents in order to protect the Nation’s citizens. Nothing is more important to accomplishing that mission than having accessibility to accurate and timely records.”

About the Author



Ed Cloughton, founder and president of PRI Management Group is a nationally recognized expert in public safety records management. Ed has over 20 years of combined experience in law enforcement and professional consulting work and after becoming a notable expert in the field founded PRI Management Group in 2008.

His business success is rooted in his understanding of the needs that both police personnel and records personnel have when it comes to crime reporting, records management and compliance, and being able to bridge the gap that often exists between these entities. Ed has provided training and consulting services to over 760 agencies around the U.S. and has been an invited speaker for the International Association of Chiefs of Police along with various other professional associations. He has been published in Law Officer Magazine, Government Technology magazine and several major newspaper articles featuring law enforcement records news.

Ed is a retired Coral Gables Police lieutenant, once assigned to manage the police records unit. His successful turnaround of this area of the department and ability to obtain agency-wide compliance with public records law became a national model for law enforcement, presented to the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

He has developed several training courses in public records for law enforcement focusing on the proper creation, maintenance, processing, release, retention and destruction of agency information according to legal standards. He is a crime data expert and also provides training in UCR/NIBRS rules and crime stat accuracy. His training consistently receives excellent feedback and he is requested to present his training by agencies around the country on a near weekly basis.

Ed holds a Master of Criminal Justice degree from Boston University, Bachelor of Arts from Loyola University New Orleans, and a certificate in Florida Public Records from Florida State University. Ed has been an invited speaker for:

- IACP Law Enforcement Information Management Conference
- IACP annual conference
- Louisiana Chiefs of Police Association
- California Law Enforcement Association of Records Supervisors (CLEARs)
- Florida Property and Evidence Association
- Michigan Law Enforcement Records Management Association
- California CLETS Users Group (CCUG)

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