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The Long Beach Police Department Doc Squad: Police Work for the Medical Professional

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Members of the Long Beach Police Department Medical Corps, also known as the Doc Squad. Photograph courtesy Long Beach Police Department

In Long Beach, California, police have developed a resource that helps preserve community health, safety, and welfare: the Long Beach Police Department Medical Corps, also known as the Doc Squad.

The Organization

Long Beach, diverse and densely populated, comprises more than 50 square miles along the shoreline in Los Angeles County. The resident population is currently estimated at more than 471,000, and business, tourism, and recreation activities bring thousands more into the city each day.

The Long Beach Police Department (LBPD) consists of 1,497 full-time employees, of whom 968 are sworn officers, in four bureaus. One of those bureaus, the Patrol Bureau, maintains four stations in the city. The department has grown into a full-service police organization with law enforcement services being provided throughout the community in marinas, schools, and airport and seaport areas.

To better address urban-area issues and be responsive to diverse interests in the city, the department has engaged in significant community outreach and encouraged participation in volunteer opportunities throughout the department.

A Component of Community Oriented Public Safety

One of the milestones in this effort started in 1989 when the department established a number of advisory groups to provide counsel and insight to the chief on various issues affecting law enforcement. Initially the groups represented seniors, clergy, racial minorities, women, and gays and lesbians. Shortly thereafter, the areas of input grew to include youth, employees, neighborhood watch, and media organizations. All of these groups have now become an integral and active part of the organization, providing input, assistance and support beyond their original purpose.

Breaking New Ground

One of the original advisory groups formed was the Medical Advisory, consisting of local doctors belonging to the Long Beach Medical Society who were interested in community

affairs and were supportive of the LBPB. The group started with 10 doctors, most of whom practiced orthopedic medicine locally. Formed under a set of general by-laws to provide structure and organization for the group, a mission and purpose were established, which called for the group to "provide support and assistance to the Long Beach Police Department in carrying out its public safety role."

This initial group of doctors took time from their busy practices to attend training at night and on weekends to become certified as Long Beach Police Department Reserve Specialists, a designation that allowed them to provide assistance to the department outside of general law enforcement duties. Once the group formed, they began to perform in their advisory role to the chief of police and grew to become much more involved with department operations.

An Integral Part of LBPB

Over time the volunteer spirit and involvement of the group grew, and along with steady leadership from the core group of doctors, the group expanded and became affectionately known throughout the department as the Doc Squad. The activities of the squad within the organization became much more extensive. Docs began participating on ride-alongs, getting to know members of the department and getting known throughout the organization, including decentralized police operations.

The doctors also increased their training, attending additional courses certified by POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training), with the outcome that the majority of the current members have attained the status of level 1 reserve officer. One member, a practicing orthopedic surgeon, has completed training to achieve level 3 status, which requires the same number of training hours mandated for a full-time paid police officer. As a result of this increased training, doctors have acted as helicopter observers, worked DUI checkpoints, assisted at community sporting events and safety fairs, visited schools to speak with children, and provided medical support during the annual Baker-to-Vegas relay race.

Valuable Employee Resource

As a result of steady involvement and success, the squad developed trust and were sought out to provide advice and consult to the organization and its members on a variety of issues. One of the major projects the squad became involved in was providing training and discussion on topics relating to employee wellness, which included presentations on the following:

- Stress and sleep disorders
- Smoking cessation
- Back and knee injuries
- Weight control and nutrition

These programs are popular and well attended by both sworn officers and civilian members of the department. When the department and police union then developed a formal physical fitness and Wellness Program for sworn officers, the Doc Squad was there to provide technical assistance and support. Several doctors volunteered to conduct mobile cholesterol screening for officers, which resulted in many more personnel participating in the program, along with timely intervention and follow-up care to employees discovering they had high cholesterol levels.

Further support to both sworn and civilian employees includes confidential medical consultations and second opinions on personal health concerns and risks. The value and extent of this service is well known to the employees who have benefited from the opportunity but largely unsung due to the strict confidentiality involved.

In one case, at the request of the department, a panel of Doc Squad physicians conducted a medical inquiry into a recurring condition suffered by an employee that had gone without medical diagnosis under traditional methods. The physicians performed a records review, met with the employee, and received reports from others with pertinent information, all with the consent of the employee and under strict conditions of confidentiality. As a result, the employee was directed to the appropriate course of specialist care for a more focused diagnosis, with the hope to better understand the condition, provide treatment, and allay the employee's fears.

Members of the Doc Squad have also developed associations with various units in the

department to provide technical assistance and support, including SWAT, K-9, harbor security, narcotics, homicide, and other functions. To assist investigators, the doctors have made themselves available to review medical reports and decipher technical material into a language understood by employees.

Asset to the Community

In addition to public safety fairs and community events, the Doc Squad has made other valuable contributions to the health and welfare of the community. For instance, they provide no-cost physicals to Police Activities League (PAL) kids so they can participate in sporting programs and events when they may not have otherwise been able to afford the doctor visit. They also work with local organizations to provide support to abused or neglected children, rape survivors, and battered spouses.

Currently the Doc Squad consists of 28 members. Although still mostly physicians, the squad has expanded its membership and capability as a result of strategic planning, recruiting and other outreach efforts over the past several years. The group now includes technical medical professionals and a nurse practitioner, along with a non-medical professional who acts as the group's administrative officer.

New Directions

Beginning in 1999, the squad began reviewing its support role in the department and embarked upon the course of becoming a deployable asset for critical incidents and other events, to supplement emergency services supplied by police, fire, and other entities. As a result, in preparation for Y2K events, the squad established a medical support trailer as part of the command post operations. Doc Squad members staffed the trailer over a three-day period, during which a number of department personnel, and a citizen, were seen for medical issues ranging from the flu to minor cuts. Many police officers were able to remain at work after treatment. This function was so helpful to the operation that the squad received a chief's citation and the Doctors were subsequently deployed in additional major events in the city.

To further develop the support capability of the squad, members initiated a drive to develop a medical support vehicle that could be deployed at the direction of the department in response to a critical incident or planned event. A used paramedic van was acquired and refurbished for use as a Police Medical Support Vehicle (PMSV). The members themselves, at very little cost to the department, accomplished the coordination of necessary repairs and equipping of the vehicle with supplies and other items. Training and certification processes are currently underway, which will allow members to fully participate in callouts and planned operations where the PMSV and medical personnel will be an asset.

Due to affiliations with the local health department and with federal Defense Medical Assessment Teams (DMAT), members have become knowledgeable with regard to nuclear, biological, and chemical agents and act as a conduit for education and support to the department on these issues. Recently the group participated in dialogue relating to mass public inoculation programs for certain types of biological agents.

Potential

The Doc Squad has become much more than the name might imply and the group is undertaking efforts to expand in terms of size and capability. Current members are constantly recruiting new members and also increasing their own levels of competence through training and deployment opportunities. As this occurs, promising potential for the group includes the following:

- Increasing the size of the squad and the diversity of the medical specialties represented to create more of an auxiliary support for emergency response and first responders
- Developing a volunteer mental health cadre to assist with post incident trauma in the community
- Benefiting the region in terms of training and support capability
- Using the LBPD Medical Corps as a model for other law enforcement agencies

The Doc Squad has become a valuable asset not only to the department but to the entire community as a whole. It is an example of a dedicated group of community volunteers

engaged on the front lines, taking an active role in making the community safer.

The bulk of the credit for growing and developing the group goes to the members themselves who have taken leadership roles, developed relationships, and honored the Hippocratic oath's order to "lead [their] lives and practice [their] art in uprightness and honor." The Doc Squad has effectively accomplished this through many dedicated years of service to the City of Long Beach. ■

[Top](#)

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