**Introduction**

In Spring 2020, local protests emerged across the country centered on reducing violent police encounters. The protests, ultimately, began the conversation of police reform through a reallocation of funds from the police department to invest in social services to help those with mental-health issues. The River Forest Village Board of Trustees has an agenda item scheduled for discussion and vote at the September 25, 2023 meeting. The proposed item is to reduce the police department budget by 25%, and to reallocate those funds to social service departments and agencies in the community.

The challenge of police interactions with residents facing mental illnesses, drug addiction, and noncriminal behaviors is not a new problem but one that has evolved over decades throughout the country. Historically, individuals dealing with mental health crises or substance addiction have often found themselves in confrontations with law enforcement due to a lack of better alternatives. These confrontations not only fail to address the underlying causes of their struggles but can also lead to tragic outcomes, damaging the trust between the police and the community. The current situation is marked by a troubling trend: an excessive reliance on the police to handle social issues that go beyond their traditional law enforcement duties.

In light of the proposal to reduce the police department budget by 25% and reallocate these funds, we recommend against such a substantial reduction in police funding. Instead, we should advocate for an increase in the police department budget to support the implementation of new programs. This approach ensures a balanced approach to community well-being and public safety. This analysis aims to examine these critical issues, provide evidence supporting the necessity for reform, and propose a policy change that involves an increased investment in police department resources.

**Issue 1: Financial Considerations in Addressing the Local Mental Health Crisis**

It is imperative that the Village Board recognize the urgent need to address the global mental health crisis at the local level. Of jailed inmates in the United States, 6.6% suffer from serious mental health issues, highlighting the pressing need for improvement of current training and community resources. However, this reform has been difficult due to the lower financial contributions to social service agencies by the Federal, State, and County government which has reduced the ability of our police officers to respond and serve people in crisis. As a result, the police have become the last resort for all sorts of social problems (Fleetwood & Lea 2022, 171). Not only does the current approach prove to be ineffective in de-escalation, it also strains the relationship between the public and our police force. Currently, public trust in the police is at an all-time low while crime and the prevalence of mental health issues is at an all-time high (Rahinsky, 2023). This is partially because police officers respond to mental health-related calls but are limited in their ability to provide long-term positive outcomes. To effectively respond to mental illness, drug addiction, and noncriminal behaviors while improving community relations with the police, additional funding for social service training and resources is imperative. By increasing financial support for social services and anti-poverty measures, the goal is to help more Americans not just survive, but also thrive, offering an alternative to solely relying on law enforcement (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown, 2023, 11).When considering an increase in resources for the police department, financial considerations must be analyzed conjunctly.

Budgeting has traditionally relied on the previous year's budget as a reference point, leading to accumulated spending patterns that might not align with community needs or affordability. On average, 97% of police department budgets consist of salaries, pensions, and benefits received by officers (O’Neill-Hayes, 2020). Contractual issues and pension obligations to personnel provide another constraint that must be considered. “A related structural obstacle to police reform is that it often requires the cooperation of police unions that are hostile to reform and skilled at preventing it” (O’Rourke, Su, and Binder 2021, 1346). Officers often rely on unions to protect them from unjust or unfair reform. Since the reappropriation of funds from the police department would likely decrease the salary of officers, the officers will turn to the union to create an obstacle to the adoption of reappropriation. This could potentially create interdepartmental tension as union contracts would need to be renegotiated if any reallocation occurs. (O’Rourke, Su, and Binder 2021, 1348). Because of this, it can be assumed that any reallocation of funds from or within the police department will result in a decrease in officers and an increase in obstacles. Although it is difficult to determine the necessary size of the police force in a given area, “any universal cut is certain to leave some cities understaffed and would likely reduce the diversity of some cities’ police forces” (O’Neill-Hayes, 2020). Overall, budgetary constraints make it hard for the reallocation of funds to be successful and effective. The proposed approach emphasizes increasing funds to programs that effectively fulfill public safety objectives at a reasonable cost. Furthermore, this shift towards a long-term vision and thoughtful budgeting allows governments to proactively consider adding funds for policing to go towards bolstering social services, reflecting a broader commitment to community well-being and addressing public safety concerns (Kavanagh and Park, 2021). Reforms can be achieved when funds are properly allocated.

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) provides research on public opinion regarding police reform, stating that 83% of the public believes police reform is necessary (Kavanagh, Wardell, and Park 2020, 1). To advance criminal justice reform, it is recommended to prioritize a proportional allocation of budgets between police and social service-related resources. This approach aims to distribute assets based on community-specific needs, moving beyond traditional law enforcement methods (Kavanagh, Wardell, and Park 2020, 34). As a result, it is proven that increased funding of mental health service and training is necessary within the police department to employ crisis response personnel. By expanding funds within law enforcement, our community can address the underlying causes of crime and achieve more balanced and effective public safety outcomes (TSU Center for Justice Research 2021, 5). The law enforcement response would shift to these resources, consisting of dedicated and trained responders to serve community members experiencing behavioral health crises (Watson, Pope, and Compton 2021, 1086). By doing this, the relationship between law enforcement professionals and the residents would improve as police officers would be better equipped to respond to mental health crises. These professionals will, ultimately, be better suited to assist and refer people in need of mental health or addiction assistance to long term care solutions (Watson, Pope, and Compton 2021, 1086). Overall, the investment in mental health training and resources through the expansion of the police department budget would provide our residents with better resources while improving the relationship between the police department and the public in terms of trust and mental-health assistance.

**Issue 2: Reducing Violent Police Encounters**

Studies show that a significant percentage of individuals suspected by the police have serious mental illnesses, ranging from six to as high as twenty percent when considering a broader category of impaired individuals. Medium and large police departments estimate that around ten percent of their interactions with the public involve people with mental illness. Additionally, dealing with mental disturbance calls takes up more of a police officer's time compared to other types of calls, like traffic accidents or burglaries. This is a problem because individuals with mental illness may not react well to standard police approaches (Watson, Morabito, Draine, and Ottati 2008, 360). Officers must be mindful of the individuals they come in contact with.

Even though a majority of 911 calls are nonviolent, the nature of the call can quickly turn violent, requiring an officer’s training to diffuse or neutralize a dangerous individual or situation (NJFOP, 2021). Data indicates that most calls for police service can be diffused, but the current police training often emphasizes use-of-force tactics and worst-case scenarios, potentially leading to escalations in otherwise peaceful interactions. However, the training needed for law enforcement is already extensive, costly, and disjointed, with separate courses needed; for example, use of force, de-escalation, mental health crisis intervention, trauma-informed and victim-centered interviewing, physical grappling, and use of less-lethal and lethal weapons, among many more (Vermeer, Woods, and Jackson 2021, 5). Consequently, there's a disconnect between officers' training and the predominantly conversational nature of their interactions with civilians (Ray, 2020). All officers need de-escalation and basic mental health response training. Officers need to also be trained in Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) response which considers not only de-escalation but also collaboration with mental health and addiction assistance service providers (Watson, Pope, and Compton 2021, 1086). Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) trained officers are needed to meet community needs and are best trained to assist people in crisis. Officers without proper training sometimes escalate crises which correlates with the aforementioned disconnect (Murray, Contreras, Kelly, et al 2023, 77). A lack of funding can be detrimental to police departments.

The cause of many controversial issues in policing today corresponds to the lack of police funding (Petersen, 2021). Defunding police can contribute to misconduct because it leaves departments with less resources to train and discipline officers. Underfunding the police department may cause an inability to be competitive on benefits and wages, which could lead to a lack of oversight and accountability due to staffing shortages (Rushin and Michalski 2020, 307). Professionalizing and training the police is important to decrease use-of-force incidents, raise performance standards, and hold officers accountable for their actions (Mourgos and Adams 2020, 43). Police officers with effective training and strategies can likely have a significant impact on crime rates. Underfunding the police reduces staff or prevents them from administering crime-fighting strategies which can lead to more crime (Rushin and Michalski 2020, 301). Funding must be maintained or increased to provide for proper training.

A good example of the correlation between police training in de-escalation and violent police encounters is seen through the Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Model. The Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Hub Model was initiated in Canada and was adopted by the Chelsea Police Department in Massachusetts. Department leaders made early believers of their own police, mental health service partners, local community leaders and advocates. Active community engagement from the street level up to the top of the Hub team has resulted in attention to at-risk community members to address the underlying issues that formerly forced negative interactions between community members and the police. Police arrest numbers were reduced by staggering levels as a result (Taylor, 2021).Because of the success of the CSWB, a similar program could be implemented in River Forest and decrease crime or violent encounters while engaging the community. Overall, the adoption of police training geared towards social services and de-escalation would have a positive impact on our community and on the effectiveness of our police officers.

**Issue 3: Retention and Recruitment of Police Officers**

During this day and age,“the communities police officers have sworn to protect are feeling less safe and have less faith in their local agencies'' (Rahinsky, 2023). Statistics on crime rate and public opinion towards police departments display that public trust in the police is at an all-time low while the crime rate is at an all-time high (Cooper, 2022). This reality not only diminishes the morale of our police officers, but hinders their ability to do their job effectively and safely. Increased criticism and negative news about police are some of the factors causing a crisis in recruitment and retention of officers (PERF, 2019). Not only has the view on policing affected police retention, the increase in violence across the country has impacted the police department employment. As of the end of May 2021, Portland, Orgon, was on track to exceed 1,000 shootings. In the first 14 weeks of 2021, New York City shootings were up 81%. In Oakland, California, carjackings were up almost 88 percent (Thune, 2021). In 2022, there was a significant increase in violent crimes such as robbery and aggravated assault with 2023 statistics expected to increase further (Cooper, 2022). Cities like Chicago, that previously reallocated funds from the police department, have been forced to incrementally raise the police budget to counteract the escalating crime rate (Reber and Corley, 2023). Other cities such as Los Angeles “also saw a surge in violent crime in 2020 and 2021, prompting the city, which had initially agreed to remove $150 million (approximately 8%) from the LAPD budget, to essentially restore the budget to pre-protest levels within a year” (Reber and Corley, 2023). Several police departments across the country have experienced significant increases in crime after their funding has been reduced (Alfonseca, 2022). The community would be better served with a properly funded police department.

The increase in crime has been particularly pronounced in New York City and Seattle. Carjackings have become commonplace in many cities, and major increases in organized retail theft have left business owners struggling, frustrated, and feeling abandoned by local leaders (Higgins, 2022). Overall, the existing literature suggests that both police staffing and police strategies can influence crime rates. To the extent that underfunding or defunding police departments reduces officer staffing rates or prevents departments from effectively employing crime-fighting strategies, this lack of funding may lead to more crime. (Rushin and Michalski 2020, 301). The public safety of the community will benefit from an investment in staffing of officers. Approximately 50% of all 911 calls are dealt with by the operators and police are never dispatched. Of the calls that are dispatched, the number of violent crimes ranges from 100 calls per 100,000 people annually to 1,400 calls per 100,000 people annually. Based on this information, it is possible for 911 response to be contracted out, however, there is no data suggesting that the contractors would solve the problem of social injustice (Lum, Koper, and Wu, 2022). These trends must be confronted before considering reallocation of police funds. Ultimately, “defunding the police” would do little to solve the problem at hand since“the communities police officers have sworn to protect are feeling less safe and have less faith in their local agencies” (Rahinsky, 2023). Reducing the police department budget would send the wrong signal to the department and the community .

Typically, 80 – 95% of a police department’s budget goes to staffing police officers (Orrick 2018, 2). If the budget was reduced by 25%, there would most likely be a reduction in staff within the police department. After the George Floyd killing, the Minneapolis city council proposed a “defund the police” agenda, as many as 100 officers have left the department since (Bailey, 2020). Many police departments across the country have reported a significant increase in resignations following public protest towards police (Mourtgos, Adams, and Nix 2021, 9). Overall, a majority of police officers feel their jobs have gotten more difficult since high-profile use-of-force incidents have dominated the national conversation. (IACP 2017, 4). The lower morale among police officers has led to a wave of police retirement and resignations (Thune, 2021). There is a void that must be filled when these officers resign or retire.

Agencies strongly believe that public perception of law enforcement limits interest in the profession and is a sizable barrier to effective recruitment (IACP 2017, 4). Police officers are drawn to the profession by a sense of duty and positive support by their community and elected officials (Stirling 2022, 10). A reduction of funding will not only affect perceptions the police officers have of their communities' support, but it will negatively affect the police department's ability to recruit and train new officers. Reallocation of funding resources will reduce the quality training needed, moving resources away from better training to fund other solutions will have a negative effect on the community (Petersen, 2021). By maintaining funding to the police department, we can send a positive signal to our officers while avoiding issues of recruitment and retention that other departments across the country are experiencing.

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendation**

The Village Board of Trustees should invest in the community by providing enhanced mental health and addiction assistance programs to the people of River Forest. The Board can achieve increased value and quality of service by providing funding to establish a well-trained group of clinicians and professionals to collaborate with police officers. Trustees should maintain or increase police staffing to ensure safety for the Village and officers. All River Forest Police Officers will receive high-level training to improve skills in de-escalation and crisis intervention. The specially trained officers will work side by side with mental health professionals in similar models, such as the Hub Model implemented by the Chelsea Police Department in Massachusetts, and the Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement (CARE) model piloted by the Chicago Police Department.

In conclusion, reallocating 25% of the police funds is not recommended. If the Village Board would like additional funds sent to social service departments, other avenues should be explored. There may be state or federal grants available to help fund these initiatives. Community fundraising may also be another possibility. Properly funded and trained police departments can have an impact on crime. With refresher or repeated training, officers can police effectively while reducing or preventing violent confrontations. Therefore, the police department should retain or increase its current funding level with a renewed focus on crime prevention, de-escalation training, and retention of officers.

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