

The Brass Triangle of Southern California

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Police in Long Beach, Santa Ana, and Oxnard have come to rely upon their “Brass Triangle” in order to effectively manage their high volume of firearm-related incidents and the resulting caseloads.

Background

- The Long Beach Police Department services the City of Long Beach which is ranked 5th in California in terms of population.
- The Santa Ana Police Department services the City of Santa Ana which is ranked 9th in California in population.
- The Oxnard Police Department services the City of Oxnard which is ranked 20th in population.

Both the Long Beach Police Department and the Santa Ana Police Department employ a forensic firearms examiner and use the Integrated Ballistic Identification System (IBIS) as part of the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network (NIBIN) Program. The Oxnard Police Department employs one forensic firearms examiner but unfortunately does not possess an IBIS system that would provide direct access to NIBIN.

An unparalleled degree of cooperation exists between the forensic firearm units of these agencies, which allows them to each effectively manage their very large firearms analysis workloads with only one forensic firearms examiner.

Problem

Although many, if not most, of the forensic laboratories across the United States are understaffed and overloaded, the crime laboratories in large cities tend to have more than one forensic firearms examiner working in their firearms unit. This is beneficial because

examiners can perform peer reviews in order to validate each other's work. Peer review is crucial because it is looked upon in the forensics world as quality assurance, thereby ensuring that the forensic examiner's work is accurate and that the findings are sound.

Therefore, police agencies employing a single forensic firearms examiner face the problem of not having immediate access to peer review in order to conduct the requisite quality assurance reviews of the casework produced.

Solution

The "Brass Triangle" has proved to be an effective solution to the peer review problem because the three members have formed an alliance to support and rely upon each other. The three forensic firearms examiners regularly exchange information, discuss casework, and conduct peer reviews in order to assure the highest degree of quality possible. Considering the fact that city budgets are strained and limited, the solution has proven to be a particularly welcomed alternative enabling police departments to offset a lack in human resources.

Indeed, the alliance formed through the "Brass Triangle" allows for efficient resource leveraging among the partners. This process is extremely valuable in difficult cases where a second opinion is warranted.

Additional Benefits Derived from the "Brass Triangle"

In addition to providing easy access to peer review, the "Brass Triangle" is also responsible for providing law enforcement agencies with additional benefits. For example, as previously stated, the Oxnard Police Department does not possess its own IBIS system. Consequently, on a weekly basis, the Oxnard firearms examiner must transport his evidence and test fires to the Los Angeles ATF Gun Center for IBIS entry into the NIBIN database. In the event that the IBIS system located at ATF Gun Center system is not available, the Oxnard firearms examiner can make use of one of the IBIS systems located at one of the other "Brass Triangle" partner sites.

The Brass Triangle partners recognize the importance of every agency contributing or "pooling" their ballistics evidence data in the NIBIN database. For what may seem to be an insignificant piece of evidence to one agency may be the case breaker for another. With all agencies submitting evidence into NIBIN, the evidence of one can now, for the first time, be viewed as the evidence of all. Ultimately, the entire NIBIN network and the public at large will benefit from more efficient and effective crime solving.

An alliance such as the "Brass Triangle" can also be extremely beneficial to large cities that employ many firearms examiners. For the purpose of this article, we shall assume that a given police department utilizes eight firearms examiners servicing in total six or more different divisions or precincts. Applying a "Brass Triangle" best practice, each examiner could be assigned as a primary point of contact servicing a specific division. This would provide more consistent and personalized service to the affected divisions.

Multiple examiners could be assigned to high-crime divisions. By implementing this process, crime lab supervisors would be able to create and institutionalize sustainable channels that will link detectives and forensic examiners in order to ensure the timely sharing of information and the generation of actionable intelligence that is so critical to solving firearm-related murders and assaults.

Tangible Results in Santa Ana, California

Santa Ana's Firearms Unit has been very successful in providing timely information to its detectives. The goal has been to ensure that a detective receives the confirmation of a hit or match within 24 hours. More precisely, this objective entails that the IBIS entry into NIBIN and any ensuing confirmation of a hit or match to the detective must ideally take place within the first 24 hours after a shooting. Timely information flow keeps investigative trails on track and increases the probability of a successful resolution of the matter. Santa Ana has been able to accomplish this by having Crime Scene Investigators (CSI) trained on IBIS. Upon returning from a crime scene, a CSI processes the evidence and enters it into NIBIN through the IBIS system. By the time the examiner comes to work the next morning, the NIBIN correlations are complete and the examiner can get to work.

The "Brass Triangle" partners work in close collaboration with their respective Homicide and Gang Detectives and have been able to sustain it through the close personal relationships that they have forged.

People, Processes and...Technology

In certain instances, despite having the best people and best processes in place, more is needed to keep pace with the demand. Technology can leverage people and processes to make them more productive. For example, a very large department with multiple divisions or precincts may need to consider purchasing additional ballistics technology to leverage data input and remove the burden from the forensic examiners. IBIS BrassTRAX 3-D is a highly automated input system for fired cartridge cases. With very little training required, a division would be able to employ a person to enter test fires and evidence at the division or local precinct. The data would automatically be channeled to the regional server for analysis by the firearms unit, thus speeding up the entire process of providing critically important leads to homicide investigators.

In conclusion, the future is bright for new and innovative technologies and techniques, which can help make crime scene investigators, firearms examiners and detectives more efficient and effective in solving gun- and gang-related violence in their cities. There is no silver bullet and not all techniques and procedures work for every city, but a combination of people, processes, and technology applied through best practices can go a long way to helping us provide better service to the public that we all serve. Detectives have a solemn and overwhelming responsibility to the victims and their families to do the best, most thorough job possible. With the sometimes-complex homicide and gang

investigations that police are faced with today – it takes the strong collaborative efforts of both investigators and forensics experts to get the job done right.

Note: The above-mentioned opinions are strictly the opinions of the author and not those of the Santa Ana Police Department.