

Best Practices in Assessment: Public Safety Hiring

Michael R. Stowers, M.A.
Stephen P. Griffin, Psy.D.
Mike Tancredi, J.D.

The goal of this document is to highlight effective hiring practices in public safety, specifically for armed (or potentially armed) personnel or other protective services positions requiring comprehensive candidate evaluations. Additionally, it will highlight the types of assessment and screening tools used at different points in the hiring process and their effectiveness.

Hiring Models

When hiring for public safety positions, such as Police Officers and Firefighters, there are two common models. The two models are **the bifurcated model** and **the post-conditional offer only model**. The difference between the two models is when and what type of testing is conducted, based upon when a conditional job offer is extended to candidates. The type of model chosen will dictate in part which assessments are most appropriate for use in selecting candidates for public safety positions.

The Bifurcated Model

In the bifurcated model of public safety hiring, applicants are tested in two distinct phases. The first phase is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provision that candidates cannot be discriminated against based on whether or not they have a disability. In this pre-offer phase, no medical or pathological information is collected from a candidate. Selection at this phase focuses on a written cognitive exam, background screening, assessment of basic skills, and the oral interview.

Candidates who successfully complete pre-offer testing are then extended a conditional job offer. This offer states that the candidate will now be hired based upon the condition that they pass all further screening measures. After this job offer is extended, screening becomes more in-depth and can include medical information. Selection during this post-offer phase focuses on pathology and behaviors that would interfere with the full duties of the job, drug screening, and polygraph results. Candidates must successfully pass all assessments at this phase in order to be hired. Failure on any one post-offer assessment is usually enough to disqualify an applicant from consideration. Assessments used during this phase require the

evaluator to be licensed in most jurisdictions and also Practice Regulations and Guidelines aid the evaluator as tools (see International Association of Chiefs of Police-Police Psychological Services Section: http://theiacp.org/psych_services_section/pdfs/Psych-PreemploymentPsychEval.pdf and the American Polygraph Association: http://www.polygraph.org/files/Model_Policy_for_Law_Enforcement-Public_Services_Pre-Employment_Screening_Examinations.doc)

The Post-Conditional Offer Only Model

In contrast to the bifurcated model, the post-conditional model does all advanced testing after a conditional offer has been given to applicants, typically after a board review process. In the post-conditional model, the written exam is still given before the offer to ascertain who has the basic cognitive abilities to succeed in this line of work. If an applicant passes the written exam they are typically invited to participate in an oral board interview, before being moved further in the selection process.

The assumption made here is that all applicants are initially eligible to be hired as long as they successfully complete the written exam used by the agency. This allows for the agency to comply with ADA regulations, while condensing the testing procedure into one streamlined phase. There are many variants to this model, but this explains the content. This process must be reviewed by the agency wanting to implement this process and must be sure it complies with local and federal laws, such as the Americans With Disabilities Act.

The Bifurcated Selection Model

A typical bifurcated selection process is outlined below. Included at each step in the process are examples and descriptions of useful measures for that step. There will undoubtedly be some variations on the process depending on the needs of an individual agency and the laws of the area or state in which it operates.

Pre-Offer Steps

1. Application

This usually consists of a basic job application form that collects basic qualifications, demographic, and contact information from applicants. At this time, information on the testing process and details of the hiring process may be given to the applicants. Completion of the application is often done en masse during an informational presentation.

2. Civil Service Exam (Basic Skills Test)

Departments can create their own exam or choose from a number of off-the-shelf providers such as

IO Solutions or Stanard and Associates. These types of tests focus on problem solving and cognitive skills used in public safety jobs. They tend to be predictive of performance in the job after hiring. Administration is usually proctored and done en masse during each hiring session.

3. Physical Fitness Test

Due to the strenuous nature of public safety jobs, physical fitness is a job requirement. Individual states mandate specific requirements for both police officer and firefighter applicants.

4. Background Screening

The background screening is designed to ensure that applicants don't have any negative indicators in their past that would prevent public safety employment. It is also used for verification of other applicant information such as education and residency requirements. The screening can be done concurrently at any point in the pre-offer phase, but is usually reserved for those who pass the initial assessments. There are a number of options to consider when choosing a background screening tool including:

onlinePHQ®

The onlinePHQ is a tool for gathering background information from law enforcement applicants. Developed by Michael J. Cuttler, Ph.D., a well-known figure in police selection, onlinePHQ uses the internet to rapidly collect background information from candidates, and to quickly review and score data according to user criteria. The tool is a predictor of specific job outcomes in law enforcement, criminal justice, and public safety applicants, using proprietary algorithms to measure risk and present "critical" items. A Discrepancy Report also highlights inconsistent responses from a candidate's previous applications via the onlinePHQ.

Because it does not require interpretation by a psychologist and is appropriate for pre-offer selection, the onlinePHQ can be a valuable tool for screening out candidates whose background may disqualify them from further consideration. Disqualification can come from a number of sources such as work history.

The onlinePHQ can also be used in the screening of other non-sworn personnel. Dispatchers, front-desk staff, and record clerks are all privy to sensitive information and should also be screened for negative backgrounds. onlinePHQ provides agencies a way to effectively and cost-efficiently screen these candidates as well.

Hilson Background Investigation Inventory – Revised (HBI-R)

The HBI-R aids in the identification of "high-risk" candidates with antisocial behavior patterns and/or job-related difficulties. The HBI-R is used for pre-offer screening in many states. However, in certain states, counties, and municipalities, this test may need to be administered as a conditional-offer assessment. Please check the legal requirements in your area for confirmation. Key Scales include: Frustration/Anger Patterns, Risk-Taking/Reckless Behavior, Reckless Driving/Safety Patterns, Antisocial Behaviors, Domestic Concerns, Integrity Concerns, Lack of Temper Control, Lack of Social Sensitivity and Work Difficulties.

5. Oral Interview

At this point, applicants who have successfully completed all previous assessments are given an interview, usually by a city police and fire board. The interview allows the board a chance to meet the applicant and assess them face to face. It also allows for clarification of any outstanding issues. These interviews should be conducted in a structured format to ensure the applicants are assessed in the same way, and should be scored using the most objective criteria possible. Exact content will vary based upon the individual department's requirements and needs.

Applicants who successfully pass the interview are now given a letter of a conditional job offer. The offer details the eligibility of the candidate to be hired given the successful completion of the conditional offer assessments. This offer is the signature turning point in the bifurcated model. From this point forward testing can include medical, pathology, and other "invasive" methods.

Post-Conditional Offer Steps

1. Pathology Assessment

The demanding mental and emotional requirements of public safety work requires that candidates be free from any pathology or other mental issues that would prevent them from effectively completing their duties. This can include things like suicidal thoughts, excessive aggression, and depression, among others. Assessments given at this point focus on identifying any potential issues that a candidate may have in order to ensure the safety of the candidate, the public, and co-workers. Two common assessments given together at this point are the:

PsychEval Personality Questionnaire (PEPQ)

The PsychEval Personality Questionnaire measures both normal personality and pathology-oriented traits to provide a multidimensional profile of the candidate, including an in-depth normal personality assessment, four key and validated public safety dimensions (Intellectual Efficiency, Interpersonal Relations, Integrity/Control and Emotional Adjustment) and a quick screen for psychopathology-related patterns of behavior (such as Health Concerns, Suicidal Thinking, and Thrill Seeking).

The PsychEval Personality Questionnaire generates the Protective Services Report *Plus* for use in screening of protective services personnel. The PEPQ is a comprehensive option for agencies needing both normal personality (screening-in) and pathology (screening-out) in one assessment saving time and cost to the agency.

Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI®)

The IPI measures antisocial behavior patterns and psychopathology that could interfere with performing the full duties of the job. The IPI contains several distinct and sometimes overlapping scales, designed to measure behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics of individual applicants. In addition, it documents combinations and patterns of historical life events which studies suggest correlate significantly with occupational failure in law enforcement. Unlike some other assessment in the marketplace, the IPI measures job-relevant dimensions for public safety positions.

IPI scales can differentiate between individuals who express socially deviant attitudes and those who act on them. Key Scales include: Guardedness, Drugs, Driving Violations, Antisocial Attitudes, Hyperactivity, Illness Concerns, Obsessive Personality, and Depression.

2. Medical/Drug Testing

At this point, candidates could undergo additional medical testing to ensure that they are capable of meeting the job requirements for public safety workers. This is also the point where applicants would be required to pass a drug test. Failure of either assessment would result in disqualification.

3. Polygraph Testing

Some agencies include polygraph testing as part of their conditional-offer assessments. The goal of polygraph testing is to not only to validate previous information, but when combined with other sources of information, polygraph results

yield a measure of the candidate's integrity.

Testing protocols vary, but the process should always be conducted by a trained and proficient examiner.

The Post-Conditional Offer Only Model

The post-conditional offer only model is set apart from the bifurcated model by the idea that candidates enter the testing process after the written exam with a conditional offer of employment. This allows agencies to do all of the testing in one phase. Medical and drug testing can be conducted alongside the background screening, for example. This allows a more streamlined approach to public safety testing.

How IPAT Measures are Aligned with Public Safety Job Requirements

One of the benefits of including IPAT products, such as the PEPQ/PSR+ and IPI, in public safety selection batteries is the high degree of relationship between test scales and job requirements, especially in the selection of police officers.

For example, California's Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) determines the job requirements for all peace officers in the state. The model developed by POST tends to also dictate how other states look at police officer job requirements. When looking at the personality factors that POST outlines as important, it is easy to see how useful IPAT public safety selection tools are. Table 1 illustrates the POST requirements and the scales from the PEPQ/PSR+ and IPI that overlap with them.

Conclusion

No matter which selection model is being used, the need for accurate and valid assessment stands. By using instruments that are job related and predictive of job performance, agencies can be confident that they are getting the best candidates for their investment.

Interested in Learning More?

For more information, visit www.ipat.com or contact IPAT Customer Service at 800 225 4728 or custserv@ipat.com.

Table 1. POST Personality Requirements and IPAT Scale Overlap

POST Requirement	PEPQ/PSR+ Scales	IPI Scales
Social Competence	Interpersonal Relations	Interpersonal Difficulties
Teamwork	Self-Reliance, Interpersonal Relations	Interpersonal Difficulties, Loner Type
Assertiveness/Persuasiveness	Dominance	Lack of Assertiveness
Service Orientation	Interpersonal Relations	
Adaptability/Flexibility	Openness to Change, Emotional Adjustment	Rigidity, Type "A"
Decision-Making and Judgment	Intellectual Efficiency	
Conscientiousness/Dependability	Integrity/Control, Perfectionism	Antisocial Attitudes
Impulse Control/Attention to Safety	Integrity/Control, Intellectual Efficiency	Hyperactivity, Substance Abuse
Integrity/Ethics	Integrity/Control	Trouble with Law and Society
Emotional Regulation and Stress Tolerance	Emotional Adjustment	Anxiety, Depression

© Copyright 2010 IPAT, Inc.

® 16PF is a registered trademark of the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, Inc. (IPAT) in the USA, the European Community and other countries. IPAT is a wholly owned subsidiary of OPP® Ltd.

® IPI is a registered trademark of OPP Ltd.

® onlinePHQ is a registered trademark of Law Enforcement Services, Inc. (LESI®) licensed to the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, Inc. (IPAT) for use in the United States and Canada.

® LESI is a registered trademark of Law Enforcement Services, Inc.

® OPP is a registered trademark of OPP.