Problems of the Police
Traffic Officer

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INTRODUCTION

The problems of a police traffic officer are not something new that started with the coming of the automobile. It began back in grandpa’s time when roads were narrow and difficult of passage for just the horse and buggy. In 1895, there were 300 automobiles, mostly imported, in operation in the United States. But in the next 50 years the situation changed. Some 85 million motor vehicles were produced in this country alone during those 50 years.

The problems of the traffic officer skyrocketed and his job took on added significance as the auto population grew and grew. It was realized that only through specialized training of traffic officials could the problem ever be handled and solved. Registrations just before World War II exceeded 33 million vehicles and by 1965 this figure increased to almost 92 million vehicles with over 98 million licensed drivers.

The total traffic problem of today, measured by almost any means, continues to rise at an alarming rate. Contrary to expert opinion, of only a few years ago, vehicle registration has not begun to level off. The two-car family and the compact car have created tremendous demands on our streets and highways. The total number of accidents continues to rise along with the costs of accidents, insurance and service to car owners. Demand for parking space is at the critical stage in most cities and traffic congestion has become a way of life. Today in almost all cities traffic constitutes a major problem if not the most important problem facing the community.

THE TRAFFIC OFFICER’S FUNCTIONS AND RECORDS

To meet this problem the community must have a well rounded police traffic program. However, this program cannot be described by the word enforcement alone as enforcement is only one of the jobs to
be done by the police. The over-all traffic function of the police is street and highway supervision. This supervision has three primary traffic functions: (1) traffic accident investigation, (2) traffic law enforcement, and (3) traffic direction. Through these three functions the police directly attack their objectives of reducing accidents and congestion. Accident prevention, whether improvement of the driver, vehicle, or roadway, depends upon accurate information pertaining to how the accidents happen and valid conclusions based upon information and facts as to the factors contributing to their occurrence.

In order to perform these activities properly, the police must do many other things in addition to the general and special staff services. First, they must give special attention to traffic records. The kind of facts needed for the traffic program are quite different from those needed for general police operations. The various clerical processes, such as tabulating, filing, and indexing are much the same for traffic reports as for reports of other police activities. But the special purposes and uses of traffic data demand that they be given special handling by trained police personnel.

At all stages in their processing, traffic reports and data must be made to serve useful and productive purposes. This data will be used by engineers, courts, educators, driver license administrators, and traffic officers. We must remember that traffic data is useful only if it serves to provide answers to problems and guides to programs to reduce those accidents and congestion that we are experiencing today.

LAFAYETTE’S TRAFFIC ORDINANCE, NEEDS, AND IMPROVEMENTS

To utilize successfully the information derived from these reports, requires complete coordination and control of all traffic functions. Lafayette realized this need in the late 1950’s and also the need for a uniform traffic ordinance to implement a successful traffic program. After thorough research into uniform traffic codes, Lafayette in 1962, passed ordinance 62-2 which gave the needed uniformity in traffic laws and established an organization capable of meeting the traffic needs—see Fig. 1.

Before the passage of this ordinance, the material traffic needs in Lafayette were taken care of by a number of departments. The street department would install and maintain traffic signs. The electrical department would maintain traffic signals and off-duty police and firemen would do the necessary traffic painting during the summer months.
Fig. 1. An organization to meet Lafayette’s traffic needs.

With this organization, the material traffic needs were met, after a fashion, but future needs and planning were impossible due to the lack of leadership and coordination. With passage of the Uniform Traffic Ordinance, we had an organization able to coordinate traffic needs of the community and ease the burden of the traffic officers. Lafayette’s Traffic Organization is much like that of the state but on a much smaller scale—see Fig. 2.

Since the development of the traffic commission and traffic improvement department, Lafayette has installed a PR traffic signal system in the central business district which has reduced traffic direction by traffic officers. Lafayette has updated 82 percent of all traffic signs in the city, has urged the passage of a thoroughfare plan, has developed a second north-south thruway in the city, is presently involved in the formation of a Salem-Union complex to fully utilize the capability of the William Henry Harrison Bridge, and has developed a working department capable of giving immediate service when an emergency arises.

The battle has not been won in spite of all of this activity. Many areas are beyond the responsibility and capability of the traffic officer and traffic department. These include additional streets, street improvements, over-and under-passes, and many others such as these. It might cost more than we are willing to pay, but we can be encouraged by the new interest in our problems by the president of the United States, the United States Congress, and our state and local agencies.
Fig. 2. Traffic organization of the Indiana State Highway Commission as applied to a city.
CONCLUSION

The traffic officer does have help and allies he has never had before but his task is monumental and will test his endurance and ingenuity for years to come.