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Members of the Common Council

## Report on the Syracuse Police Department Activity for the year ended June 30, 2002

### Introduction:

The Syracuse Police Department (SPD) is the largest unit of city government. More people are employed in providing police services than in any other function. Police services cost more than any other service. During the budget process, the Common Council has reviewed the services being provided. Citizen groups have raised questions about the provision of police services. Some organizations, like Reconsider, Inc. have requested information formally.

The Department of Audit is responsible for reviewing the activities of city government to assure that the resources of the city are used efficiently and effectively.

### Objectives:

In view of these concerns, the Department of Audit initiated a project with three purposes: 1. to review available data to determine the reliability of the data, 2. to analyze the impact of the services, and 3. to make recommendations, if warranted, for the improvement of the public safety function.

### Methodology and Scope:

All City departments present performance data as part of the annual budget review. In fact, the City Charter mandates a "program budget" based on activity indicators. The performance data includes estimates of activity for the coming year and actual data for prior years. When this project was initiated in April 2003, the fiscal year ended June 30, 2002 was the last year for which actual data was available. As the basis for this report, we reviewed the actual activity indicators for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2001 and ending June 30, 2002.

We met with personnel in the SPD Planning and Research Division to gain an understanding of the processes used in gathering the performance data. All activity of the SPD is recorded in a database maintained by the Onondaga County 9-1-1 Center. The system is referred to as CHAIRS (Criminal History and Arrest Incident Record System.) The 9-1-1 center receives calls for service, assigns a specific number to each service request, and dispatches the appropriate police agency in response. Service requests are also reported to the 9-1-1 Center when the SPD takes direct action. The service requests are referred to as “incidents.” The action taken by the SPD in responding to a service request is recorded in the database by type of action. Approximately 75 action codes are used to record the results of the service requests or incidents.

We did not review individual police records, but we did observe the processes by which those records are maintained. We also sought input from sources with particular areas of expertise, including organizations advocating for housing, education, drug law reform, and public safety. We also attended neighborhood meetings on a regular basis to assess areas of concern to citizens.

The detailed performance data was furnished to the Department of Audit by the Syracuse Police Department in electronic format. No information about persons involved in the incidents was included in the data. Using several data base programs, the Department of Audit analyzed the data. The individual service responses were summarized by incident type, actions taken, and geographic location. Arrest records were analyzed by incident type and violation type. It was not our intent, as defined by the scope of our inquiry, to determine the results of actions beyond those recorded by the SPD. We did not, therefore, inquire about the results of arrests, or about convictions.

In order to identify the location of requests for police services, we obtained a list of the geographical areas included in defined patrol areas called “beats.” The SPD uses 23 beats identified by numbers. For the purpose of this report, we assigned labels describing the beats in general terms.

We modified the scope of our review in the process of analyzing the data. We found that drug-related incidents greatly exceeded the impact of all other types of incidents in terms of arrests. We looked in more detail at drug-related incidents. We attempted to distinguish between incidents involving the distribution of drugs from those involving the use of drugs.

#### Findings:

1. The data furnished by the Syracuse Police Department is reliable. During the budget process, the SPD reported that the department responded to 203,000 requests for services in fiscal year 2002. The actual number of incidents provided by the SPD from the CHAIRS was 202,008. 20,000 of these were follow up incidents initiated in the prior year. So the detailed data we analyzed included 188,668 incidents.

In the budget process, the SPD reported that 28,400 persons had been arrested during the 2002 year. The detail analysis listed arrest reports totalling 28,800.

The differences were insignificant and well within the normal range of acceptable variations.

2. The SPD took a total of 479,000 actions in responding to service requests. In responding to 188,668 requests, the SPD recorded a total of 479,000 individual actions. Many incidents resulted in multiple actions. While this statistic seems to indicate a very high level of activity, detail records that list the date, time, and location of every action support it. On an average day, the members of the SPD take over 1,300 actions.

3. Arrests accounted for 28,800 actions. 188,668 incidents resulted in arrests of 28,800 persons. Approximately 80 arrest reports are filed on average every day. Taken as a percentage of the total population of the city, this is a relatively small number. But a figure of 80 daily, or 28,800 annually is significant because it represents a major commitment of time and dollars. It should be noted that we were not able to determine how many repeat offenders were included in the total since the data we reviewed did not include information that would identify any individuals.

4. Drug-related incidents result in the highest number of arrests. Of the 28,800 arrests, over 6,300, or 21.9 % resulted from drug-related incidents. Drug-related arrests exceeded arrests for assaults, disturbances, and larcenies combined. The following table shows the frequency of each major arrest type:

5. Arrests for Drug-related incidents were concentrated in six neighborhoods. Incidents resulting in arrests were analyzed based on the geographical location by beat of the arresting officer. Arrests for drug-related incidents were concentrated in 6 beats: South West side, Valley West, Central Business District--South, South East Side, Near South West Side, and Near West Side. These beats are located in the urban core of the City. According to the City's Consolidated Plan for 2003-2004, these neighborhoods "are areas of minority concentration." They also have high percentages of households with low to moderate incomes.

6. A number of drug-related arrests were based on marijuana possession. Of the 6,300 arrests for drug-related incidents, 1,984 persons, or 31.5% of the arrests, were charged under Section 221 of the Penal Code. This section of the law relates to possession, sale, or use of marijuana. This finding is important given the serious national debate about the effects of marijuana. Of the total arrests, 913 or 14.5% were charged as felonies.

7. Incidents that were not initially classified as drug-related resulted in drug-related arrests. In reviewing the sections of the law under which the arrests were made, we found that 595 incidents resulted in arrests under Section 220 and 221 even though the original request for police service was listed as a type other than "drug related." For example, 321 service requests were filed for "Suspicious Persons." Upon further investigation, the officer discovered a drug-related offense and completed an arrest report. This resulted in

20 arrests.

8. Citizens appear to be more concerned about the violent effects of the distribution system rather than the private use of drugs. When asked about their concerns related to “drugs,” citizens at neighborhood meetings universally referred to the violence and quality-of-life issues associated with drug distribution in their neighborhood. They stated that they were not concerned about individuals using drugs in private. Like alcohol in the 1920’s, drugs that have a high economic demand are distributed through an underground market system. The underground distribution system generates a cycle of violence calling for ever greater law enforcement activity.

#### Topics requiring further analysis

1. Enforcement activities initiated in response to drug-related incidents have unintended consequences. The areas with the highest number of drug-related arrests are also the areas of the city with the highest number of vacant units. We were informed that drug enforcement activities that are focused on “drug houses” often result in police executing search warrants to confiscate evidence. In the process, the dwelling units are rendered uninhabitable. A second unintended consequence results from regulations of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Families with a member convicted of a drug related crime are not eligible for public housing.

The education system suffers another unintended consequence. We were informed that the majority of young men in the alternative education programs of the Syracuse City School District have fathers who are incarcerated. There is a pattern of drug related crimes, violence, arrests, incarceration, and life on the streets. And then the cycle repeats itself in the next generation.

2. The resources of the City are not being utilized effectively in relation to drug arrests. A significant number of persons is arrested daily for drug-related activity. The number is so high that we can calculate that if the strategy were successful, we would soon run out of persons to arrest. We determined that the record count of arrests is not duplicated, but we were not able to determine the number of repeat offenders.

Still, the arrests continue year after year. If the purpose of the policy is to change behavior and reduce the use of drugs, the policy is not achieving its goal. The drug activity is continuing with an ever-increasing spiral of violence.

The budget performance data does not give a clear indication of the purpose of arresting persons in drug-related incidents. It is measuring “outputs” rather than “outcomes.” Theoretically, the purpose of police services is to give citizens a sense of personal security. The question has to be posed, “are the citizens more secure as a result of the 28,000 arrests?”

Recommendations:

Based on the foregoing, the Department of Audit recommends the following:

1. The SPD should be commended for maintaining a sophisticated state-of-the-art record keeping system. The system has a high degree of acceptance throughout the department. Personnel responsible for maintaining the system have achieved a high level of professionalism in operating a complex data system.

The data maintained by the SPD should be incorporated directly in the SyraStat model. The data is outcome-driven and has the elements necessary to provide a base for strategic decision-making.

2. The Common Council should provide for further analysis of the data specifically with regard to racial profiling and the question of repeat offenders. While the data reviewed for this report did not include specific information about persons involved in reported incidents, that information may be available from the CHAIRS database. If it is available in electronic format, the Council could be provided access to significant information without spending additional resources.

3. Alternatives to the City's current policy related to the enforcement of drug-related laws should be examined. The fact that the SPD devotes such a significant percentage of resources to drug-related incidents stems from the tasks it is assigned by the Mayor and the Council during the budget process. Alternatives may range from forms of "decriminalization" to programs that address the root causes of the drug problems. Such programs provide for treatment on demand, harm reduction, and prevention rather than absolute prohibition.

4. The Council should conduct a formal survey to determine the attitudes of the citizens towards drugs. Based on our preliminary information, the "drug problem" is related to the distribution system more than to the use of "drugs." Devoting so many taxpayer resources in an effort to eliminate the distribution of drugs could be a significant misappropriation of resources if the primary concern is not drug use. A survey would also assist the City in defining the mission delegated to the Syracuse Police Department. It would also assist in assigning priorities to assure that law enforcement resources are directed to the areas of greatest need.

Please contact the Department of Audit if you would like additional information or if you have questions you would like to discuss.

We thank the members of the Syracuse Police Department and the other participants who assisted us in preparing this report.

City of Syracuse Department of Audit

Minchin G. Lewis City Auditor

December 29, 2003