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**Switching Departments in Law Enforcement**

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I had already served a year at a juvenile probation department in Southern California before moving north with my fiancé for his post-doctoral program. Then I had to start over at the bottom with a second probation department. After roughly another year, I was picked up as a police officer and [sent to the academy](https://www.policemag.com/training/article/15346264/how-to-survive-the-academy) with six others to represent our new agency.

My first attempt at becoming a police officer was a dismal failure — one that ended with me being “allowed to resign” from the field training program in lieu of termination. I was devastated. As I cried ugly-faced tears at my locker, the female sergeant told me, “Go home and be a wife.” Her not-so-subtle implication was that I would probably be better at that than trying to be a cop.

The joke was on her. I had been married less than a year and that commitment was also circling the drain.

**Training Trauma**

There was, though, one more thing she didn’t know about. During the prior weekend, one of my teammates had tried to [sexually assault](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/major-us-police-departments-plagued-officer-officer-sexual-abuse-retal-rcna53020) me as we were cramming for a big test. Luckily, I managed to kick the guy off me and run as fast as I could down the street before anything truly heinous could transpire, but I was shocked, horrified, and deeply ashamed I might have done something to make this man think his advances would be reciprocated. To my regret, I told no one about the attempted assault.

After the incident, it was obvious to my team that my demeanor had changed. The stress of having to smile and work with the guy was an enormous hurdle for me to try to get over alone. Needless to say, the trauma was a big blow to my self-confidence.

I can’t blame my washing out during field training entirely on that one traumatic incident, though of course it was a big part of what happened. Still, I was doing my best to fail the training program all on my own. Safety mistakes, forgetfulness, crumbing under pressure, and plain old fear and insecurity all contributed to my defeat. I accept responsibility for failing. But the fact that two other female officers had openly made bets on how long it would take for them to get me to quit made it sting even more.

In retrospect, it’s very clear that particular department and I were not a compatible fit. I was unwelcome, discouraged, and deeply immature at handling the adversity I was facing. Instead of rising above the small expectations my coworkers had for me, I dug a deeper hole to crawl into. At that time, I wasn’t so much thinking about switching departments as I was considering leaving law enforcement altogether. That didn’t last long, though.

**Seasons for Change**

Five weeks after leaving that department, I accepted an officer position with the police department of the city next door. The new PD had exactly zero females in supervision or management, and one single newly promoted woman detective. I did not have high hopes my welcome would be any more kind at the new job. But hey — I didn’t have an income, and I needed one. I wasn’t picky. Instead, I became determined. I was going to pass the FTO program despite the gossip about me already spilling over from my old department.

My hard work paid dividends. I [passed that training program](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/standards-for-rookie-cops/) on time and with no issues. Not too long after that, I became a Field Training Officer myself. I even worked a special assignment during the three-and-a-half years I was there. I liked it there. It was a much better fit, as they say.

There was one small problem during my tenure. The agency was in the very expensive, and somewhat exclusive, San Francisco Bay Area. I had a toddler by then. I was trying to afford part-time daycare, work the graveyard shift, pay astronomical rent, and make a 12-mile commute that took 40 minutes each way on a very good day. Even with copious amounts of overtime, there was no possibility of a white picket fence during my entire career. And as my daughter neared kindergarten age, I couldn’t stop thinking about the gang-infested public schools in the neighborhoods I could afford.

So once again, I made the [decision to move police departments](https://tacticalgear.com/experts/police-officers-guide-to-lateral-transfers). I was still in my twenties, not so entrenched in life that another fresh start would be overly disruptive. Age, family commitments and friendships had not nailed my feet to the floor quite yet. The difference was this time, it was my choice to leave and start over.

My fourth career move in law enforcement was to a suburb of our state capital. This time, in switching departments I took a 23% pay cut, but gained a 44% break on my living expenses. Before I even started, I bought a small house, reconnected with people I already knew in the area, and thoroughly investigated the culture of my new department.

**Reasons for Change**

In selecting a fresh start, I knew I would be relegated back to weekends and nights for shift options. That was fine. My daughter was young and didn’t yet need rides to and from school or activities. And since I was respected as a training officer in my previous department, I could afford to be more selective in my next agency of choice. Having been with two probation departments and two police departments, I had compiled a list of workplace needs and wants if I was going to uproot my little family and make a go of it two hours away.

I mentioned police culture. This is a giant factor in fit and feel for employees. A police department and sheriff’s office may appear similar on the surface, but they operate on different planes — often with very different types of calls. The hallmarks of a sheriff’s office often include rural areas with sparse backup, coroner body retrievals, deputies who live and work in the community, and usually a more relaxed attitude toward petty crime and punishment. In contrast, police departments tend to see more frequent and higher-profile crime, fancier equipment, vocal citizen scrutiny, and less of a family atmosphere than their county counterparts. Knowing your own personality and what type of policing you prefer can help narrow your search for a new law enforcement home.

**Department Culture**

Besides cost of living, child-raising opportunities, and department feel and culture, I also wanted to find a [healthy agency](https://www.cordico.com/2023/02/22/what-i-see-in-you-surviving-a-toxic-police-department/) to settle in for the long haul. The PD I had my eye on offered a competitive salary, though not the highest in the area. They offered top-tier health benefits and retirement vesting. Liability mitigation for officers and strong policy commitment were standard. The agency was one of the very early subscribers to Lexipol’s policy management solution – and later, to Lexipol’s Cordico mobile wellness app.

Perhaps one of the best perks was the department’s commitment to personal growth. This appealed to me the most. [Training and continuing education](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/understanding-law-enforcement-training-requirements-in-policy/) were a priority for the department. Just about everyone was afforded an opportunity to learn more about their career, both at home and away at conferences. Special assignments were shorter than six years and regularly had rotations and expansion.

The medium-sized department also cared about their employees. This was something I had not experienced in my previous jobs. Every shift began with a paid, one-hour workout period. [Peer support](https://www.cordico.com/2022/04/27/3-considerations-developing-a-peer-support-program/) was plentiful and promoted. Group and family activities outside of work were scheduled regularly. A citywide mentorship program was encouraged, with time allotted for it. Best of all, mental wellness for all employees and retention of quality people was touted constantly. At my agency, I felt respected and wanted — not like I was just a person getting through my shift to get a paycheck and get out.

**The Long Haul**

Finally, my choice of a new police department hinged on the potential for longevity. Was there room for growth, advancement or promotion? What about special assignments? And as a female, I wanted an environment that saw my differences as a possible asset and not just as a placeholder for a demographic audit. I wanted to feel, well, *wanted*.

My grandfather worked for Coca Cola for 56 years, until the day he died of a heart attack at his front door. His funeral was packed with coworkers. I remember wondering what it must have been like to spend more than half of your life at one workplace. I thought it had to be comforting, yet confining. I would never know — just two generations removed, hardly anyone works for the same company their entire lives.

There are sound reasons to [evaluate your circumstances](https://www.police1.com/police-jobs-and-careers/articles/12-important-considerations-before-moving-to-greener-pastures-zn25wpl2PAgSrLXb/) and make the hard decision to start over. After all, switching departments can be trading up. Just be sure your decision is made with sound reasoning and careful consideration. Take stock of what’s important to you in your career. What factors are you running from or running to? Make sure the negative aspects of your current agency are not just temporary or political in nature — likely to flip-flop in the opposite direction when new leadership is installed. Will a move deliver enhanced quality of life for you and your family?

I spent 22 years at my last agency before retiring as a patrol lieutenant. I made lifelong friends, raised two kids in a safe community, bought a modest home, and enjoyed the opportunity to be a motorcycle cop for over five years.

My final choice was my best choice. I wish it had not taken me so many attempts to get it right. Still, it was all part of my journey. Each of us has a different path to take.

**Missy Morris** started in public safety as a juvenile probation worker after graduating from University of California Santa Barbara in 1991 with a degree in behavioral psychology. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to work in probation before quickly transitioning to police work. After serving three years with the Palo Alto and Mountain View police departments as a patrol officer, she spent the following 22 years of her 28-year career at the City of Roseville. Missy worked in critical incident negotiations, eventually becoming the multi-city team leader and serving seven years on the state board of hostage negotiators. Missy feels her greatest assignment was a five-year stint as a traffic motor officer riding a BMW and working fatal accidents. She held several special assignments before retiring in 2020 as a lieutenant. Missy now works with the Lexipol Professional Services Team, working closely with Cordico wellness solution.