

## **Sheriff Department Vehicle Maintenance First Final Report January 1996**

### REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

During Ventura County ride-a-longs with Deputy Sheriffs it was apparent that some patrol vehicles and installed police equipment were not fully operational and posed a potential danger to the officers' safety and curtailed their ability to carry out their duties.

### PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

On-site visits were made to:

- Ventura County Fleet Services Main Repair Facility regarding procedures and practices for Sheriff patrol vehicles' maintenance, repair, replacement and vehicle life
- Information Systems Department (ISD) to discuss the installation maintenance and removal of the communications electronic equipment as well as the special electrical systems in patrol vehicles.
- East Valley Sheriffs Station, Watch Commanders, Shift Patrol Sergeants and those responsible for patrol vehicle availability and maintenance. Discussion centered on problems with vehicles with special installed equipment such as flashing colored police lights, police channel radios, frequency scanners, sirens, as well as on problems related to the vehicle oil levels, and mechanical items.

### FINDINGS

- Presently there are no written procedures for removing a defective vehicle from service.
- Fleet services responds to requests for repairs when presented with a written request known as a "kick slip". Only specific problems noted on the "kick slip" are addressed since periodic maintenance is performed on all vehicles, at 4,000 mile intervals or every four months whichever comes first.

Patrol Deputy Sheriffs can initiate an out of service repair request (kick slip) if a repair is required and/or when safety is an issue.

The Deputy Sheriff, at the completion of his patrol shift, discusses with the Patrol Sergeant any equipment or vehicle problems encountered. The mutual decision to kick the vehicle immediately to Fleet Services is made. The only reason for any delay in kicking a car to Fleet Services would be a severe shortage of vehicles which could result in a compromise of public safety if there were any further reduction in vehicle numbers for patrol service. "If it still runs use it until we get past this crisis," appears to be the prevailing attitude. Another consideration for not removing a vehicle with known problems is if it is near the end of its useful life. The overriding factor is that it is more important to have a vehicle available even with limitations than to have a dangerous shortage of patrol cars.

- It was discovered that certain deficiencies existed in the older patrol vehicles that would soon be retired. Some of these deficiencies could pose a threat to the deputies(s) safety

during the performance of duty. These shortcomings included such items as: (1) hand held radios with dead spots (locations where communication did not take place) although the radio was operational, (2) vehicle installed two-way communication radio with a high noise level, (3) inoperative radio scanner, (4) driver side door that would not readily open and had to be kicked open repeatedly. This problem occurred repeatedly with the door. (5) vehicle hesitated under heavy load, sometimes stalled out (during a high speed response to call), (6) four quarts low on oil.

- Top priority for service are the Sheriffs Department Patrol Cars. Lower priority services are established by a senior officer in the Sheriffs Department. He also sets priority considering 1) new vehicle outfitting to augment the fleet, 2) badly needed replacement units. Both of these enhance officer safety.
- Network Services is responsive as long as the service is reported on the "kick slip" and the broken vehicle is available to them.
- The Grand Jury noted a temporary, unusually high incidence of vehicle loss due to mechanical failures, blown engines, transmission, wrecks and other problems where they could not be used. This condition was a result of continued use under maximum mechanical stress such as high speed pursuit and urgent calls for help.
- One noted vehicle was a "lemon" nearing its end of life but still ran with diminished capabilities. It was kept in service in order to keep from compromising public safety, although at some risk to the Deputy Sheriff's on patrol.
- Vehicle life is 100,000 miles or 2 years whichever comes first. An exception to this is when a unit exhibits problems that are not readily corrected and they are a safety hazard to the using patrol officer, they are removed from service.
- A vehicle ready for retirement is not turned in until a fully outfitted new vehicle is available so there is no impact to full patrol capability.

## COMMENDATIONS

1. Network Services has sound procedures for maintenance of communication equipment and works well with the Sheriff Department in establishing work priorities. These procedures maximize the availability of patrol vehicles for duty.
2. Fleet Services has specific procedures for performing periodic and unscheduled maintenance and repairs on a demand basis resulting in a timely turnaround of patrol vehicles in safe operating condition.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Sheriff should issue written procedures for determining how and when a vehicle is to be taken out of service. The procedures should clearly state the responsibilities of the officers and the Patrol Sergeant.
2. The Sheriff should conduct periodic instruction courses for Patrol Division personnel already on the force and make them mandatory in the indoctrination process for new officers.
3. The Sheriff's Department Patrol Division should critically review the fleet maintenance program to

insure that deputies and their officers understand their responsibilities and follow the required procedures.

4. The Sheriff's Department should initiate a formal policy that makes each Patrol Officer responsible for his vehicle conditions and its installed equipment at the beginning of each shift. It is recommended that the inspection procedure specifically list all items to be checked including the engine's fluid levels and communication equipment.
5. The Sheriff's Department should increase the patrol vehicle fleet in 1996/97 budget considerations to avoid having unsafe vehicles in use.

#### RESPONSE

Due from elected officials within 60 days and from public officials within 90 days.

March 27, 1996

The Honorable Robert C. Bradley  
Presiding Judge  
Ventura County Superior Court  
800 South Victoria Avenue  
Ventura, California 93009

Honorable Judge:

The Ventura County Grand Jury "First Final Report" of February 1, 1996 contains an investigation with recommendations regarding "Sheriff Vehicle Maintenance." This letter is the statutorily required response.

The serviceability of law enforcement vehicles is of major importance to both the delivery of emergency services and to the safety of the officers delivering those services. Over the years the Sheriff's Department has worked closely with County Fleet Services in developing vehicle specifications and replacement criteria as well as procedures for service and repair.

The Sheriff's Department has two "General Orders" (policies) that have provisions applicable to the subject of this Grand Jury report, 1) "Vehicle, Use and Assignment," and 2) "Vehicles, Maintenance Of." There are also several other policies and practices in place (some written and some unwritten) that pertain to the way divisions, bureaus and/or area stations, handle vehicle matters. As an example, there is a requirement that all patrol officers turn in a daily work log that contains a section titled "Vehicle Condition" for the officer to list the results of his/her inspection of the vehicle they drove.

A "Vehicle Safety Committee" was established many years ago to deal with law enforcement vehicle issues. This committee was created to provide a proper forum for dealing with issues and problems, or perception of problems, of the type identified in the grand jury report. Additionally, as mentioned in the Grand jury report, a senior officer, Support Services Division Administrative Lieutenant (Information Services Bureau), is designated as the department wide "Vehicle Coordinator" pursuant to a provision of the general orders. This position chairs the Vehicle Safety Committee and handles/coordinates most matters between this department and both Fleet Services and County Communications. It is interesting to note that neither this lieutenant nor members of the Vehicle Safety Committee were contacted regarding the problems, or perceptions of problems, presented to the visiting Grand Jury member(s).

Fleet Services has established several countywide policies and procedures that are followed by all county departments in the servicing and repairing of vehicles. It establishes the service requirements/policy (presently every 4000 miles for patrol vehicles) and the method of obtaining needed service and/or repair. It also provides the required service/repair request form, commonly known as a "kick slip." For vehicles in need of repair, an officer completes the required service request form ("kick sheet") and turns it in with the keys for designated personnel to handle the necessary interaction with Fleet Services. During normal business hours, Monday through Friday, an officer also has the option of taking a vehicle with minor problem(s) directly to the closest Fleet facility and, if possible, the repair will be made quickly while the officer waits. Some common supplies, such as light bulbs and fuses, are made available within Sheriff's Stations so that officers

can themselves quickly make some minor repairs. Every time a vehicle is serviced, a mechanic also performs a multi-point safety inspection that will automatically cause additional repairs to be made on any item found defective.

The criteria for removal and/or replacement of a vehicle is established by countywide policy adopted by the Board of Supervisors acting upon input from both Fleet Services and user departments. The present criteria for replacement of a patrol vehicle is 100,000 miles, or upon a determination that the vehicle is no longer mechanically sound. Fleet Services tells us that their records indicate that with the present Ford "police package" vehicles, substantial mechanical problems are not the norm and if they do occur, it is usually between 60,000 and 80,000 miles (drivetrain still handled under warranty until 85,000 miles). Very few major problems occur between 80,000 and 100,000 miles. There is a feeling among some patrol officers that the older patrol vehicles break down a lot, however, fleet repair records do not support this perception.

The Grand Jury report seems to have focused on one patrol vehicle encountered on one occasion and uses it to make some generalized assumptions about all "older" patrol vehicles (Note: because of the 24 hour nature of law enforcement service the average patrol vehicle is replaced at 100,000 miles when it is only three years old and, thus, the term "older" patrol vehicle does not necessarily equate to "old" in terms of the actual age of the vehicle). Fleet Services service records do not support the generalized assumption made from this one vehicle. Even though "older" patrol vehicles may have some cosmetic deterioration, as a general rule they do not have problems that render them unsafe to operate. According to repair records, the door sticking problem used as an example in the grand jury report, is an uncommon condition that appears to be a one time unique problem associated with this particular vehicle. This door problem was only reported on one occasion and it was immediately repaired. This vehicle has since been replaced.

The Grand Jury Report also listed "hand held radios with dead spots" as a deficiency in older patrol vehicles. Hand held radios are not a part of a vehicle's equipment and their capabilities have nothing to do with the age or mileage of a vehicle.

Because of the mountainous terrain of this county, there are many communication weak areas and "dead spots." The patrol vehicle radios work reasonably well in most areas but do also encounter some "dead spots." The weaker hand held radios experience more difficulty in some areas, which is not associated with the condition of the hand held radio, but is instead caused by the local terrain. County Communications has been working on this situation and some improvements have been made in some areas. However, to fix all of the "dead spots," additional transmitters/receivers will have to be located on several new hilltops. Millions of dollars will be needed for property acquisition, road development, electrical service, radio equipment, and buildings. Some time ago, as an effort to help with this problem, cellular telephones were installed in patrol vehicles working the unincorporated areas.

In regard to the recommendation that the Sheriff's Department increase the patrol vehicle fleet, meetings between Fleet Services and the Sheriff's Department have produced a plan to establish a patrol vehicle "loaner" pool. This pool will provide additional patrol vehicles to temporarily replace those in for major repairs and/or extended periods of time. It will also help facilitate the immediate replacement of patrol vehicles at 100,000 miles.

It is obvious that the Grand Jury and I share the same strong opinion that unsafe patrol vehicles should never be sent into the field. I will continue to assess the situation and institute appropriate measures to ensure that officers do not drive unsafe vehicles. I thank the Grand Jury for its review of this matter and for its concern.

Sincerely,

LARRY W. CARPENTER, Sheriff