

The department also investigates causes of fires. The top reason for fires in calendar year 2002 was cigarettes, which accounted for 2,358 fires. The Fire Department also provides services to the Port of Los Angeles. In 2003, the port purchased four new fireboats, including the most advanced in the world, and gave them to the Fire Department to assist in port security (*Business Wire*, 3/28/03).

Police Department

Charter Sections 570–576

A Los Angeles Vigilance Committee was organized in 1836. The “Vigilantes,” as they were known, lasted well into the era of “official” law enforcement, which began in 1851. In that year the city marshal was appointed as the first peace officer in the awakening town. But the Common Council neglected to appoint a police force. Alone, the marshal was ineffective.

In 1853, the council authorized the 60 active and 40 reserve members of the volunteer Los Angeles Rangers. They worked hard to suppress the gamblers and carousers who worked in the “wide open” town. (The Vigilantes were also working hard, with spies and undercover agents spread throughout the population.)

The two groups retired about 1855. They were supplanted by the first uniformed force, the smart-looking, military-styled, blue-clad Los Angeles City Guards. The guards patrolled the saloons and the approximately 400 gambling halls.

In 1869, the Common Council authorized a force of six men under the marshal, who were paid a percentage of fines collected in lieu of regular salary. A year later, the department was placed under a Board of Police Commissioners. The city numbered almost 5,000 citizens, many of whom believed in a wide-open style of living. Since, as of 1876, the chief of police was also the dogcatcher and the city tax collector and received 2.5 percent of all tax monies collected, the profitability of the job tended to distract from establishing an effective policing agency.

Authority over the department seesawed for the next 50 years between the chief of police and the Police Commission. In 1925, the situation stabilized when the city charter placed the department under the control of the Police Commission.

In a city whose public officials were not particularly well known or visible to the public, the chief of police had a major role in the government, particularly after William Parker was appointed to the position in 1950. The charter bolstered the chief's position, as well as that of other department heads, because they were covered by the civil service system. Unless the chief committed a major violation, he or she would be almost impossible to dislodge.

In the 1960s and 1970s, racial conflict centered attention on the LAPD. Civilian oversight of the department was hard to attain. The videotaped beating of African-American motorist Rodney King in 1991 finally led to changes in the governance of the department. Following the outcry over the King beating, Mayor Tom Bradley appointed the Christopher Commission in 1991, which issued a scathing report about police misconduct and called for new governing mechanisms. Voters approved a set of Christopher Commission recommendations in the June 1992 elections.

The department today is governed by a five-member Police Commission, with members serving for a maximum of two five-year terms. The commissioners are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council. While most city commissioners may be removed unilaterally by the mayor, this is not the case for police commissioners. A police commissioner removed by the mayor has the opportunity to appeal to the city council, which by a two-thirds majority may overturn the dismissal.

Although critics have often charged that the police commissioners are subservient to the mayor and the chief, they do have considerable power. The commissioners "issue instructions" to the chief of police, except in the area of discipline, which is the chief's prerogative. They appoint and remove an executive director of the commission and an Inspector General (IG), whose job is to oversee investigations of police misconduct.

The Christopher Commission believed that the Police Commission spent too much time on detailed matters such as the issuance of police permits. In 1992, the city council therefore established by ordinance a Police Permit Review Panel. Upon delegation by the Police Commission, the panel authorizes permits for official police garages for towing and for such businesses as massage parlors, pool halls, junkyards, and security guards.

The Terror Threat and Los Angeles

The terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, affected public safety planning in Los Angeles. While no attacks occurred on the West Coast, there was considerable worry that Los Angeles might be a target in the future. Assessments by city officials suggested that Los Angeles International Airport was one of the most attractive targets in the United States for terrorist attack. In 2000, police broke up the Millennium plot to attack LAX.

The new challenge posed by terrorism led to changes in the organization of the LAPD. Rather than establishing a new department along the model of the federal Department of Homeland Security, Los Angeles built its anti-terror program around existing and new resources. In 2003, the chief of police, William Bratton, created a Homeland Security Bureau within the LAPD.

In building its anti-terror organization, the department was able to draw on such existing units as the Bomb Squad and the Hazmat (Hazardous Materials) Unit. Organized crime units offered intelligence experts.

The anti-terror operation, whose name has changed several times, provides closed-door briefings to the mayor and the city council on a regular basis. In addition, LAPD officers rotate through an assignment in Washington, D.C. at the headquarters of the Department of Homeland Security. Close working relationships have developed since 2001 among the LAPD, the FBI, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff. In February 2006, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa proposed to create permanent anti-terror and disaster response units within the Police and Fire Departments.

Should a terror emergency ever occur in Los Angeles, the various departments and offices will have to work quickly and in a coordinated manner. In the field, the supervising Fire Department and Police Department officers would make the initial determination about which department should take the lead. The initial city reaction would be directed from an underground bunker called the DOC (Department Operations Center). Civilian leaders would take charge in the nearby EOC (Emergency Operations Center).

Source: Interview with John Miller, head of the Homeland Security Bureau

Owing to the great sensitivity of the position of chief of police, the charter now includes a system for appointment and removal of the chief that allows greater civilian oversight. The chief no longer has civil service protection. Previously, chiefs could not be removed without cause, and civil service status meant that civilian oversight was extremely difficult to implement. The reforms limited the chief to two five-year terms, the second of which requires reappointment by the Police Commission. The mayor appoints the chief from a list of six names supplied by the commission. The mayor's choice must be confirmed by a majority vote of the council.

Removal of the chief is in the hands of the commission. The chief must apply to the commission for a second term. The commission may grant or refuse the request. The city council may intervene under Section 245, the provision of the charter that allows the council to review and overturn decisions by city commissions. The commission does not have to wait for reappointment, however, to remove the chief. The commission can remove the chief at any time, subject to the power of the mayor or the council to reverse the commission's action. The city council itself can remove the chief by a two-thirds vote. Unlike the commission and the council, the mayor cannot directly remove the chief.

In 1995, voters added the position of Inspector General (IG) to the charter. The IG, designated to oversee departmental investigations of police misconduct, reports directly to the commission, not to the chief. After questions were raised before the charter reform commissions about limits placed on the IG, provisions were added to the new charter to strengthen the office. The IG was guaranteed access to the same information about the department that the commission had and was also freed of the necessity to report to the commission through the commission's executive director.

Voters have always placed a very high priority on public safety, perhaps the highest priority of any city service. Yet, the city has struggled for decades with one of the nation's lowest ratios of officers to population. The comparison to New York City is striking. With nearly 40,000 sworn officers in New York compared to just over 9,000 in Los Angeles, the ratio of population to each officer is 205:1 in New York City and 399:1 in Los Angeles, with twice the geographic area to cover. Patrolling a vast city with a relatively small force has been an enduring challenge for the department.