

# WHY WE **SHOULDN'T** WRITE POLICE REPORTS

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**Y**es, you read the headline correctly — we should not write reports in police work. Nor should we type them. We should dictate them. Typing reports takes too much time for the average police officer, and writing them takes even longer. The time saved by dictating reports could be used to fight crime, patrol proactively and provide better customer service to our respective communities.

At the Chula Vista (California) Police Department (CVPD), we have been dictating reports since the 1960s and this has allowed for more thorough reports because an officer is merely speaking their thoughts instead of having to write and/or type them. Adding a few other sentences of detail takes only seconds though dictation. Better quality reports are a result.

We shied away from dictating for a few years after we moved to a different report-writing database. Upon doing so, we noticed overtime spent on typing our reports increased significantly. By that time, all of our in-house transcriptionists had been allocated elsewhere and those job descriptions were eliminated.

A team of about 35 officers (which represented about one-third of our patrol division) was randomly chosen to carefully document how much time they spent typing reports. Although imprecise, these numbers are very close estimations and were vetted by their respective sergeants. We determined in one pay period alone (two weeks), 449 hours were utilized typing reports during “duty” time. This did not include the 113 hours of **overtime** spent typing reports for late arrests and/or reports on their “Friday” (our protocol requires reports to be completed before officers go on days off). The 113 hours of overtime equated to roughly \$7,000 in overtime costs. **Between duty time and overtime combined, one-third of our patrol officers spent a total of 562 hours typing reports in two weeks.** We knew something had to be done, as we were one of the lowest-staffed agencies in California at that time, with an officer ratio of roughly 0.87 officer per 1,000 residents. We knew our staffing could not support the proper investigations and/or thorough reports that our community deserved and that we had an ethical obligation to provide.

Thus, we looked at bringing back report dictation, but the hiring of in-house personnel for this task was no longer an option. We looked at several different transcription companies. One of the companies (SpeakWrite) allowed our agency a test period of unlimited use for 30 users for 30 days. We took them up on their offer and carefully documented our use and the correlating overtime along the way. We studied the report-writing labor hours during



*Detective Ruby Lopez-Ng gets ready to dictate an arrest warrant affidavit.*

that 30-day window (not precise but vetted at several supervisory levels) and we determined the following:

In two weeks, 562 hours of report writing dropped to 83 hours, and **113 hours of overtime specific to report writing dropped to eight hours.** We went from \$7,000 in overtime costs to merely \$489 in overtime specific to report writing during that pay period. The results were immediately clear and when presented to our Command Staff; the research began the same day for the best fit (cost and functionality) to immediately implement transcription services for all sworn personnel. We also determined our personnel opted to dictate other work-related items such as memos, operational plans, trainee evaluations, etc., saving even more time in the process. An audit of our overtime related to report writing (after approximately 24 months of using SpeakWrite) indicated overtime costs remained significantly lower than typing. Dictating reports has become accepted as more efficient — especially among our newer officers — who had never dictated, and lateral officers who came from an agency that typed reports.

Both sergeants and investigators immediately noticed the quality of reports improved when reports were dictated. Hidden benefits that we can't put a price on include officers acquiring better public speaking skills and better articulation (verbally) of what happened at an incident. These translate into better communication with people in the field, by phone and in better courtroom testimony. In addition, officers are more comfortable speaking about something on official record, such as during telephonic search warrants.

There is also an indirect increase in officer safety when reports are dictated, because an officer is not sitting in their patrol car with their head buried into their computer screen, especially at night. Dictating reports can also reduce the potential for work-related injuries such as



Officer Kofi Agyeman prepares to dictate a report.

back/neck problems and carpal tunnel syndrome due to repetitively typing in unnatural postures (e.g., typing while sitting in a patrol car, restaurant booth, etc.). In addition, time and gas money can be saved because an officer no longer needs to drive to a “safe” location such as the station, police storefront, etc. to type a lengthy report.

Also, an FTO who wants to document a trainee’s performance on an incident or task can dictate their observations the moment it is safe to do so. We have some FTOs who after each traffic stop, investigation and the like spend a minute or two dictating their observations and what they taught their trainee thereafter. By the end of a shift, the entire narrative portion of a trainee’s evaluation is completed, which otherwise could have taken up to an hour per FTO, per day.

We know from a separate study we conducted that the average dictation time for our crime reports is about eight minutes of spoken narrative. We know from past data that same report would have taken the average CVPD officer more than 30 minutes to type. Based on these numbers, one report can save more than 22 minutes of time per officer, per report. When this is aggregated over several reports for several officers, an entire patrol shift can gain several hours of productivity each day, time that’s better spent on being proactive and fighting crime instead of typing away.

We have also found officers who are millennials to be comfortable with the transition to transcription because the dictation technology is app based. In addition, many were already acclimated with dictating text messages, emails and the like into their smartphones outside of work.

Each agency has its own unique needs, and there are several different transcription companies to choose from. CVPD thoroughly researched several transcription companies. For CVPD, the company that was the best fit (cost, simplicity, turnaround time and recording platform) was SpeakWrite. It is compliant with several required data security domains, including CJIS, HIPAA, “government cloud,” and could be uploaded through a smartphone (free app), landline and also from a standard digital recorder (via a computer). It has an average turnaround time of three hours, at which point the finished report is waiting in an officer’s email. Therefore, an officer can dictate and submit a report during his/her shift, and the finished product can be ready during the same shift. It also has the ability to transcribe body-worn camera (BWC) videos and/or multiple speakers



Officer/FTO Rachel Yates dictates a trainee evaluation. In doing so, she’s able to sit upright and view her surroundings rather than focus on her computer screen..

## DICTATION TIPS

- **Begin with writing out an outline of bullet points to stay on task when dictating.**
- **Spell out all names, including street names the first time they are mentioned.**
- **Enunciate numbers individually. (Instead of saying, “24,” say, “two four.”)**
- **Use phonetics on letters similar to talking on the radio when spelling names out (saying, “K as in King”).**
- **Add formatting and punctuation as you go — e.g., saying, “next paragraph, period,” etc.**
- **Proofread the completed/typed report carefully to ensure license plates, addresses, direct quotes, drug weights, etc. are all properly transcribed before you submit your final report.**

(transcribing a meeting or interview with a suspect, attorneys, etc.).

In summary, I would encourage other law enforcement agencies to look into dictation for their reports. Finding a transcription company that best fits your agency needs will save your agency time, money, increase thoroughness in reports, increase officer skillsets and increase officer safety.

For comparison purposes, CVPD currently has 232 sworn officers, serves a population of more than 270,000 over 52 square miles. Chula Vista is approximately 7 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2018, CVPD responded to 94,000 calls for service (CFS), which resulted in 23,600 reports generated by CVPD officers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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