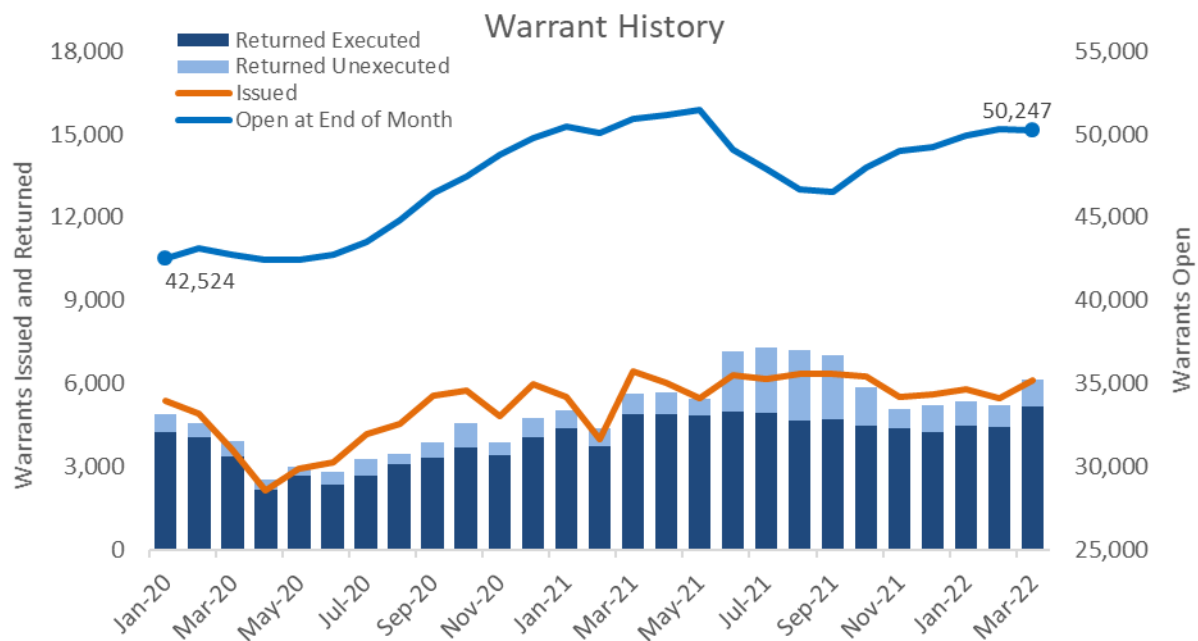


Harris County Multi-Agency Violent Persons (VIPER) Task Force

Background

Harris County has seen a spike in violent crime as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise in crime has contributed to an increase in warrants issued and in turn has created a backlog of outstanding warrants, leaving violent and dangerous criminals out on the streets.

As of March 2022, the Harris County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) Criminal Warrants Division had 50,247 outstanding warrants, of which 4,883 were for aggravated offenses and 703 for murder. Before 2019, the Criminal Warrants Division was receiving between 3,000 and 4,000 warrants per month; in the past year, the division has been receiving an average of 6,000 new warrants per month. In addition to the increased number of warrants, at the peak of the pandemic the division was forced to temporarily re-assign investigators from executing warrants to supporting other divisions to augment security measures. All of these factors have contributed to the growing number of outstanding warrants.



Currently, the Criminal Warrants Division is composed of two teams. There is a team of 11 assigned to the HCSO Gulf Coast Violent Offenders and Fugitive Task Force and a team of six assigned to the Violent Criminal Apprehension Team. With current resource levels, the two teams can clear an average of 265 warrants per month. However, they are receiving between 800 and 1,000 new warrants for aggravated felony offenses and murder offenses each month. With a clearance rate of 25 – 30% they are not able to make a significant dent in the number of total outstanding warrants.

Approach

Recommendation: Create a multi-agency Task Force designed to focus exclusively on tracking down the most dangerous offenders: people accused of aggravated offenses (such as aggravated assault where serious bodily injury occurred, or a weapon was used in the offense) and those with murder warrants. This Task Force will be incorporated into the General Investigations Division/Criminal Warrants Section as the Harris County Violent Persons (VIPER) Task Force. With a backlog seemingly with no end in sight, hundreds of criminals may feel free to go on committing violent offenses without being held accountable. The VIPER Task Force will put a stop to the culture of not feeling there are consequences for criminal activity.

Having additional capacity will allow the Criminal Warrants Division to address the growing number of bond revocations and bond forfeitures. As of April 2022, there were 1,000 open warrants due to bond revocations and/or bond forfeitures for individuals who were out on bond for aggravated felony offenses who had committed a new crime and/or violated the conditions of bond set forth by the court. These fugitives tend to be career criminals with histories of violence, and they pose a significant threat to public safety. Therefore, individuals with revoked and forfeited bonds for serious offenses will be a top priority for VIPER.

The prioritization of warrants will be:

- 1) By offense, in order of priority: Aggravated Robbery, Aggravated Assault, Aggravated Sexual Assault of a Child, Injury to a Child, Aggravated Assault Family Member, and Aggravated Sexual Assault
- 2) By date issued: the unit will pursue newest first and work their way back towards clearing the backlog (To address older warrants, the subject of the warrant will be researched to determine if we have a good address on the subject; this will be accomplished through data base searches, criminal history searches to determine if the individual is in the custody of an outside agency. The probability of successful execution, again, coupled with the propensity of the person to re-offend, will be used to prioritize the execution of older warrants.)
- 3) By propensity of repeat violence of the wanted subject.

VIPER is modeled after the very successful US Marshals Fugitive Task Force. Utilizing their best practices, the unit will bring together Harris County law enforcement agencies to leverage their agencies' expertise in support of fugitive investigations. The collaboration of regional law enforcement agencies will improve communication, surveillance capacity and analytical research to ensure the prompt locating and apprehension of our region's most violent fugitives. This multi-agency effort is a force multiplier that will benefit all participating agencies equally regardless of their size and resources.

Bringing all Harris County law enforcement agencies together and working collaboratively will allow for a faster response to identify and address a spike in criminal activity in a specific area. The collaboration will allow the task force to know about and bring to custody the most prolific offenders in the county with a propensity for violence. Agencies will no longer be working in silos. The task force will have the ability and flexibility to focus resources in the area of interest

and bring the offender to justice. The unit will not be restricted by geography, they will all execute warrants throughout all of Harris County.

Personnel

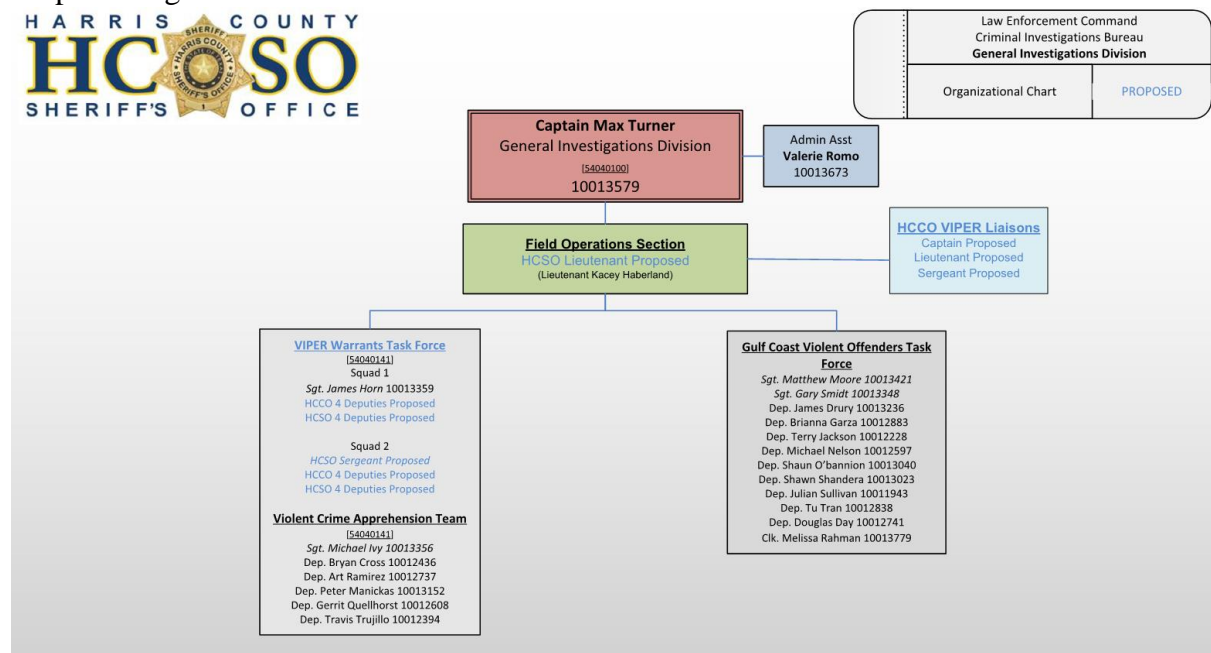
The VIPER Task Force will be a multi-agency unit dedicated to the execution of Harris County Warrants within Harris County. The Task Force will be split into two teams; each team will consist of four Deputy Constables and four Deputy Sheriffs. By Texas law, the Harris County Sheriff's Office is the custodian for the warrants; thus each eight-person team will be supervised by the Harris County Sheriff's Office, in coordination with Harris County Constable's Office liaisons. As part of this Task Force the assigned representatives from the HCSO and the Constables will all work as one unit.

This unit will be housed under the HCSO General Investigative Division. Personnel will report to 810 San Jacinto as needed for warrant assignments and warrant returns, otherwise they will be in their assigned areas of operation executing warrants.

Incremental personnel include the following:

- 1 Constable Captain
- 1 Sheriff Lieutenant
- 1 Constable Lieutenant
- 1 Sheriff Sergeant
- 1 Constable Sergeant
- 8 Constable Deputies (1 from each Constable Pct.)
- 8 Sheriff's Deputies

Proposed org chart follows below:



All participating agencies will have 30 days after the formation of the Harris County VIPER Task Force to review and sign the multi-agency Memorandum of Understanding to participate in the Task Force. If for any reason a Constable's Office is not able to participate, their deputy position will be transferred to and filled by the Harris County Sheriff's Office.

Impact

As a means of estimating impact, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Team (VCAT) provides the closest benchmarks. (The Gulf Coast Violent Offenders and Fugitive Task Force provides a less relevant comparison due to the level of additional federal support activities performed.)

The VCAT team consists of five investigators and one Sergeant. In 2021, their results included:

- 564 felony warrants cleared (all aggravated and violent crimes)
- 408 bodies arrested
- 47 felony warrants cleared per month (average)
- 34 bodies arrested per month (average)

Scaling these VCAT results by 3.2 (considering the increased team size of 16 investigators), forecasted impact is as follows:

- 1,804 felony warrants cleared per year
- 1,305 bodies arrested per year
- 150 felony warrants per month
- 108 bodies arrested per month

Given an expected 20 working days per month, projected daily results include an average of 7.5 felony warrants cleared and 5.4 bodies arrested per day. These are aggressive targets representing very focused work, particularly accounting for research time and surveillance.

With an estimated 108 bodies arrested per month and an estimated jail stay for each of less than two weeks (assuming the majority are subsequently released on bond, absent those with extremely violent offenses or prior bond revocation), an increase to the jail population of at least 50 individuals is expected. Jail leadership acknowledges that while the jail is currently over capacity, they will be able to handle this influx.

Ultimately, accelerated warrant execution should reduce opportunity for recidivism and reduce overall violent crime rates.

By expediting warrant execution, HCSO also expects a reduction in extradition required from outside jurisdictions, with associated reduction in extradition costs.

Budget

Personnel will be funded as described above, with necessary equipment; the budget below reflects annual costs.

Each member of the unit will need their own vehicle to be able to perform investigations on their assigned warrants. Due to the nature of the investigations being performed, the sensitivity of the criminals being pursued, and the surveillance required to identify and locate offenders, the request is to lease 21 vehicles. Leased vehicles will allow the flexibility to swap-out vehicles to remain undercover if necessary.

Funding for the program will be provided by ARPA Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. This supplemental funding is temporary and not a part of the annually approved HCSO or HCCO general fund budgets.

Total budget requested: \$2,613,919

PERSONNEL	HCSO	HCCO	Total	Unit Cost	Total Cost
Captain		1	1	\$ 160,284	\$ 160,284
Lieutenant	1	1	2	\$ 141,971	\$ 283,942
Sergeant	1	1	2	\$ 128,027	\$ 256,054
Deputy	8	8	16	\$ 99,185	\$ 1,586,963
Total Personnel	10	11	21		\$ 2,287,243

EQUIPMENT		Total Cost
CDW	Laptops and sleeves (21)	\$ 36,939
MOB WIRELESS	Netmotion licenses for laptops	\$ 504
VERIZON	Annual cost of data lines	\$ 9,573
CRYE PRECISION	LVS Ballistic Body Armor (21)	\$ 20,163
	Handheld radios (21)	\$ 75,537
Total Equipment		\$ 142,716

VEHICLES	Unit Cost	Total Cost
Total Vehicles	Leased Vehicles (21)	\$ 8,760
		\$ 183,960

TOTAL COST	\$ 2,613,919
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