Troop-Initiated and Pack-Initiated Strategies for Den Chief Placement

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Abstract

Many scouting communities suffer from a shortage of, or a total lack of, den chiefs. Even when adult leaders and eligible Scouts know about the den chief position, they can't always take the right steps to place a Scout in a den. Both the Scout and the adult leaders must leave the comfort zone of their own Scouting unit to fill a den chief vacancy. Commissioners play an important role in forging links between separate units, and they may play a valuable role in den chief placement. This paper outlines two strategies commissioners may use to promote den chief placement. In strategy, a troop contacts local packs to try to place eligible Scouts in dens. In the other, the pack contacts a troop to try to fill den chief openings. After the commissioner has demonstrated one or more strategies by placing some den chiefs, unit leaders may follow the same strategies themselves, using the relationships they've established between the packs and troops.

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1.0 Introduction

A den chief is a youth member of Scouting, often a Boy Scout, who serves as an assistant to a den leader in a Cub Scout den. The role takes advantage of the fact that the Cubs may relate better to another, older, Scout. A smart den leader can use the den chief to make den activities more fun and effective for the Cubs. The den chief may also aid in den discipline, since he acts as a slightly older member of the den who consistently follows the den leader's directions.

The role of den chief also benefits Scouting in a larger sense by encouraging the Cubs to remain in Scouting. Most Scouters generally agree that Cub Scouts are more likely to cross over to a troop if they are familiar with Boy Scouts and what they do. When we place a Scout directly in a den, we give the Cubs direct experience with a Boy Scout. They will ask him about the patches on his uniform and he will tell them about events at troop meetings and outings. There don't seem to be statistics on how den chiefs affect crossover rates: the percentage of Cubs who join a troop as a Webelos. However, most Scouters and professionals believe that the crossover rate is higher when dens have den chiefs. We might also expect Cubs to favor their den chief's troop when crossing over.

Despite their potential value in improving a den and in bringing new Scouts into troops, den chiefs are rare in many communities. The typical den chief is an older brother or close relative of a Cub in the den. In other cases, the den chief is related to a close friend of the den leader. In such cases, neither the den leader nor the den chief need to contact an unknown person in another Scouting unit.

While Boy Scout advancement encourages Scouts to reach out to unknown adults -merit badge counselors -most Scouters recognize how hard it is to leave one's comfort zone. To place a den chief, adults and youth alike must cross a unit boundary, which is outside the comfort zone of the troop and pack.

This is a natural role for commissioners: their work routinely crosses unit boundaries. If a unit commissioner, or assistant district commissioner (ADC), already has a relationship with the pack and troop, then the commissioner can help establish the lines of communication and relationships necessary to place den chiefs. Depending on the community and the unit leadership, the commissioner may only need to place a den chief or two before the units take over the process themselves.

This paper looks at two general strategies for den chief placement: troop-initiated placement and pack-initiated placement. In troop-initiated placement, a troop has one or more den chief candidates, and troop leaders contact packs to try to place the den chiefs. In pack-oriented placement, one or more dens want to recruit den chiefs, and pack leaders contact troops to fill the openings. Any qualified youth member of a traditional BSA unit for older youth, whether a troop, team, or crew, may serve as a den chief. However, the typical den chief in Scouting literature is a Boy Scout. When this paper refers to a *troop*, keep in mind that a den chief may also be a Venturer or Varsity Scout.

The remainder of the paper is organized into the following sections:

- Background information on den chiefs

   o The evolution of den leadership in the BSA

   o Den chief requirements

   o Obstacles to den chief placement besides institutional boundaries

- Orchestrating the placement process

   o Troop-initiated placement

   o Pack-initiated placement

- Conclusion, and an annotated list of references

1.1 Evolution of Den Leadership

The den chief role has evolved from an essential one to an almost forgotten one. When the BSA developed its "Cubbing" program in 1929, there was an adult leader, the Cubmaster, in charge of the pack, but individual dens were run by den chiefs (Scouting.org 1, 2011; Willis, 2010). Lord Baden-Powell had developed his "Wolf Cub" program in 1914 for boys intrigued by -but too young for – scout troops. *The Wolf Cub's Handbook* (Baden-Powell, 1914) organized the younger boys into "packs" under the supervision of a male or female "cubmaster."

Ernest Thompson Seton, whose earlier work developing youth programs helped inspire Lord Baden-Powell in his construction of Boy Scouting, and who served as the first Chief Scout of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), proposed a "Cubs of America" program in the BSA's early years. Co-founder Daniel Carter Beard, the first National Commissioner, and James E. West, the first Chief Scout Executive, initially opposed the Cub program. Beard and West wanted to focus the BSA's attention on boys in their early and middle teens. They believed that resources spent on a program for younger boys might jeopardize the BSA's primary objective. (Nally, 1980). Seton left the BSA in 1915.

Although the BSA did not officially sponsor or endorse a Cub program, it became the official US publisher of Baden-Powell's *Wolf Cub's Handbook*. Numerous troops established "junior" or "cub" groups for boys too young to sign up as full-fledged Scouts. The BSA finally addressed this by officially introducing "Cubbing" in 1930, after a 1-year trial (Willis, 2010).

Seton's original proposal for Cubs placed "Cub Moms" in charge of small groups of younger boys. When the BSA rolled out the program in 1930, dens were overseen by "neighborhood mothers' committees" but den chiefs were responsible for den meetings and activities (Nally, 1980). As mothers became more involved in den meetings, their role apparently evolved into the Den Mother, which has

since become an adult den leader of either gender. Today, of course, the adult den leader is an essential part of den leadership while the den chief is optional.

1.2 Den Chief Requirements

The *Cub Seoul Leader Book* (BSA, 2001) and other publications with guidance on den chiefs often distinguish between a "Cub Scout" den chief and a "Webelos" den chief. When it comes to appointing den chiefs, however, the requirements are the same. A den chief must be one of the following:

- An older Boy Scout or Varsity Scout

- A Venturer who has been a Boy Scout

Den chiefs may only be males, since a female Venturer will not have been a Boy Scout. Moreover, the den chief must be a registered member of one of these "older youth" units. The den chief is not a registered member of the pack. A den chief is selected and/or approved by the following:

- The senior patrol leader and Scoutmaster, Coach, or Advisor

- Cubmaster and pack committee

Since the adult leadership of both units must approve a den chief appointment, these leaders may enforce other requirements. For example, the ambiguous term "older Boy Scout" may turn into a specific age range, or it may remain at the leaders' discretion. Leader-established requirements often arise from *recommendations* made regarding eligible Scouts:

- Rank of first class or higher (BSA, 2001)

- Former Cub Scout (BSA, 2001)

- Webelos den chief must be at least 13 years old (Troop 216, 2000)

- Not "too old" (Ulicki, 2004)

No doubt these are only recommendations because the National Council is willing to grant units flexibility in appointing den chiefs. Although the rules don't require the den leader to approve a den chief assigned to the den, such approval seems essential in practice. A den chief is unlikely to succeed if the den leader doesn't approve of him.

1.3 Obstacles to Den Chief Placement

The principal obstacle to den chief placement is often the institutional boundaries that naturally exist between typical packs and troops. The units have separate teams of adult leaders and separate unit committees, even if they are sponsored by the same chartered organization. These different organizations develop their own personalities and ways of transacting business. It can be difficult for an outsider to participate in the group, but this is what is needed for den chief placement.

The Northern Star Council (NSC) has proposed a change in unit organization that could reduce the barriers between packs and troops in the future. As part of its strategic planning process, the NSC developed a proposal to restructure multiple units chartered to a single organization (NSC, 2011). Instead of being completely independent, these units would share a "Core Committee" of adult leaders that provide unit management for a pack, troop, and crew all chartered by the same organization. While the proposal identifies several benefits, the one most important here is that it provides the pack and troop with a built-in mechanism that crosses the unit boundaries. This would greatly simplify den chief placement within related units. However, not all packs and troops will share a chartered partner. There will always be the challenge of placing a den chief across institutional boundaries.

This paper focuses on strategies to help break down the institutional barriers. However, these are not the only barriers to den chief placement. Many of the obstacles appear in on-line discussions posted at

"Scouter.com." Others may already be familiar to experienced adult leaders. Here is a summary of other obstacles:

- Some Scouts think of den activities as "been there, done that" and don't wish to return to the Cub Scout environment (Scouter.com I, 2008).

- Some Scoutmasters prefer to have Scouts fill positions that more directly help the troop (Scouter.com 2, 2008).

- Some Scoutmasters don't believe that the den chief position represents true leadership (Scouter.com 2, 2008).

- Untrained den and pack leaders often don't even know the position exists, and don't try to recruit a den chief even if they know an older Scout who could fill the position.

While this paper focuses on institutional boundaries as a problem with den chief placement, we must keep other obstacles in mind. A commissioner may be able to overcome these other obstacles by asking unit leaders their views on den chiefs, and by providing a little impromptu training on their roles and benefits.

2.1 Orchestrating the Placement Process

Once the leaders of both pack and troop recognize the benefits of placing den chiefs, the commissioner can try to bring the units together. We will first look at den chief placements initiated by the troop. Then we look at how a pack might initiate den chief placements. In both cases the units may proceed without commissioner involvement. The commissioner only needs to step forward if the units need help in getting together.

Regardless of who initiates the placement process, four steps must take place:

1. The troop or crew leadership approves potential den chiefs that they provide.

2. The pack leadership approves potential den chiefs that they place.

3. A den leader decides to offer a particular Scout a place as a den chief.

4. The den chief ensures that his schedule is compatible with the den's schedule

If a particular pack is interested in placing den chiefs from a particular troop, then it is likely that the pack will accept a candidate as long as the troop leadership has already approved him. For this to work, both the pack and troop committees must first discuss their expectations regarding den chiefs. The commissioner may play an important role here. The commissioner can ensure that the troop has established and enforced standards for den chief candidates. Then the commissioner can communicate those standards to the pack to assure the pack that den chief candidates are qualified. If the units have a pre-established policy on approving den chief candidates, then the rest of the process may flow smoothly. No one – Scout or leader – wants to go through a recruitment process only to have the candidate turned down by unit leadership.

This is also an opportunity for any adult leader, including the commissioner, to derail the whole process. If a pack or troop leader insists on unreasonably high standards for den chiefs, then no candidates will appear. The commissioner must also be careful when discussing den chief requirements. Make it clear what the official requirements are. If the pack or troop considers additional requirements, encourage them to look at the available candidates first. If there are a dozen boys looking for den chief positions, then the other requirements may exclude the less promising candidates. On the other hand, if only two or three boys are interested in the role, then additional requirements may eliminate all possible candidates.

Once the pack and troop agree on den chief requirements, two steps remain. These steps depend on which unit is most motivated to place den chiefs. If the troop has the strongest motivation, then they perform a troop-initiated placement as described below. If the pack has the strongest motivation, they may perform a pack-initiated placement described in a later section.

2.1 Troop-Initiated Placement

Discussions by unit leaders suggest that this is the most common case: the troop has den chief candidates and seeks a pack to place them. This may evolve as part of a troop's ongoing efforts to cultivate relationships with packs, particularly so that a pack's Cubs will consider joining that troop. Troop leaders have identified a few strategies to develop such relationships (from Scouting.org 1, 2008):

- Have troop members serve as helpers at the Pinewood Derby so that the pack becomes familiar with them.

- The troop sponsors an event especially for the local pack or packs, like a bike rodeo or an "Activity Pin Roundup."

Such events help break down the barriers between the pack and troop, but they don't lead directly to den chief placement. If a troop wants to place one or more potential den chiefs, then they must take some initiative. They can either approach the local packs to seek den chief opportunities, or they can ask their commissioner to help. Either case leads to a "job interview" in which the prospective den chiefs introduce themselves to a pack and, in particular, to den leaders. This interview may take one of two forms, or it may be a combination of the two:

- Pack introduction: The Scout or Scouts introduce themselves at a pack meeting and provide a little entertainment so that Cubs and leaders may see who they are.

- Pack interview: The Scout or Scouts are interviewed individually by den leaders and/or the pack committee.

2.1.1 Pack Introduction

In a pack introduction, the Scouts introduce themselves at a pack meeting and provide a brief entertainment for the Cubs. The introduction should be sponsored and coordinated by an adult leader from the troop, although it could also be coordinated by a pack leader. The entertainment can be a skit, song, or skills demonstration, performed by individual den chief candidates, or by the Scouts as a group. The choice of activity and its execution can show how well the Scouts can relate to and interact with the Cubs. Den leaders who might want a den chief get to see the candidates first hand without having to commit themselves to appointing one of the candidates.

At an appropriate time, before all den leaders have left the meeting, the coordinating adult asks them individually if they are interested in one of the Scouts to be a den chief. If a leader is interested, the coordinator brings the Scout and den leader together to talk further and to examine schedules to determine if a den chief appointment will work. If so, then the Scout and den leader may proceed with the appointment, complying with any procedures the pack and troop might have in place. The coordinator is not responsible for finding places for potential den chiefs. The coordinator only ensures that all den leaders have observed the Scouts and decided whether or not a den chief appointment is desired. The coordinating adult provides a go-between so that den leaders don't have to refuse to appoint a Scout directly.

The coordinating adult may need to arrange visits to additional packs if not all Scouts find den chief positions. The coordinator should ensure that the Scouts don't have unreasonable expectations: den chief placement is not guaranteed. Den leaders might not want to place a den chief, or might want a different Scout for a den chief, even if the Scout is fully qualified and capable. Coordinators, whether

commissioners or troop leaders, should ensure that the Scouts understand that many reasons may be behind a decision *not* to place a particular Scout in a particular den.

Here is a checklist for arranging a pack introduction with one or more den chief candidates:

- Talk to the troop leaders to identify appropriate den chief candidates

- Identify some eligible Scouts who are interested in becoming a den chief

- Collect information about them: particularly rank, age, and prior Cub experience.

- Verify with the troop leadership that these Scouts are indeed eligible to be den chiefs

- Contact the pack leadership and gauge interest in placing den chiefs. If the pack isn't interested, call another pack.

- Arrange for the Scouts to visit the next pack meeting. Be sure the pack gives them time in the schedule.

- Be sure that the Scouts bring along their personal schedule, calendar, and/or appointment book so that they may confirm their availability for den meetings.

- Make the visit. During the visit, identify den leaders who may be interested in placing a den chief. Speak to them after the Scouts have performed their introduction.

- Introduce the den leader to a Scout of interest and help them arrange his position as den chief.

- Repeat until all den leaders or Scouts are arranged.

2.1.2 Pack Interview

In a pack interview, the pack committee convenes a meeting to review den chiefs. This may be a part of a regular committee meeting, though it may take a large portion of the scheduled time. The den

leaders who are interested in appointing den chiefs attend the meeting as well as other pack leaders as needed. Such an interview will be more akin a conventional job interview than the pack introduction. Instead of *showing* the pack what the Scouts are like, the Scouts must *tell* the pack who they are and why they would be good den chiefs. In addition, the Scouts and the recruiting den leaders should bring accurate personal schedule calendars with them, to ensure that both the Scout and the den can meet at the same time. Schedule checking may be part of the process of interviewing individual Scouts.

Ideally, the Scouts attend in the company of a troop leader or commissioner who is coordinating den chief placement. This is not a requirement, but it promotes a stronger relationship between the pack leadership and other community Scout leaders.

The pack should strive to make the den chief selection process as efficient as possible. The interviews should only be scheduled when the appropriate leaders and candidates are available. There is no point for a candidate to be interviewed by a den leader who is not recruiting a den chief. Once the committee has interviewed the applicants, they should make decisions as soon as possible. If pack leaders know they won't be able to assign den chiefs once every candidate is interviewed, they should tell the Scouts when to expect a decision.

This type of interview may be more challenging for the Scouts than for the pack leaders. The Scouts must behave well in a situation that doesn't necessarily show off den chief skills. Interviews of this sort are always stressful, and candidates who lack confidence may simply avoid den chief service to avoid such an interview.

Here is a checklist for arranging a pack interview for den chief candidates:

- Talk to the troop leaders to identify appropriate den chief candidates

- Identify some eligible Scouts who are interested in becoming a den chief

- Collect information about them: particularly rank, age, and prior Cub experience.

- Verify with the troop leadership that these Scouts are indeed eligible to be den chiefs

- Contact the pack leadership and gauge interest in placing den chiefs. If the pack isn't interested, call another pack.

- Arrange for the Scouts to visit the next pack committee meeting. Be sure the pack gives them time in the meeting schedule. The pack may want to arrange a special meeting to interview den chief candidates.

- Be sure that the pack has established a time line for either choosing den chiefs or for deciding not to appoint den chiefs. Ideally they intend to decide after having interviewed all of the Scouts who visited.

- Be sure that the Scouts bring along their personal schedule, calendar, and/or appointment book so that they may confirm their availability for den meetings.

- Attend the interview. It is then up to the pack leadership to fill den chief positions or not.

Ideally, the den leaders should "close the deal" with den chief candidates on the spot: either hire them or say "We're not interested." Neither the Scouts nor the leaders want matters left uncertain.

2.2. Pack-Initiated Placement: The Troop Visit

In pack-initiated placement, pack leaders visit local troops and talk to Scouts who may be appropriate den chief candidates. Like pack interviews, the pack leaders are going to rely a lot on what candidate Scouts *say,* although the time spent at the troop meeting may also provide insight into Scouts' behavior.

As with troop-initiated placement, the units should address general issues of Scout eligibility and availability before a troop meeting takes place. Both the troop and pack have to decide whether they have particular minimum requirements for age, rank, and experience before placing a particular Scout as a den chief. Matters are easiest, of course, if both agree to meet minimum BSA standards, or to meet specific recommendations, like a minimum of first class rank. A typical agreement would be that any Scout may serve as a den chief who meets the units' minimum requirements. The final selection then depends only on the individual den leader and the candidate Scout.

Once the pack and troop agree on Scout eligibility requirements, they can schedule the troop visit. The troop should announce the visit ahead of time so that interested Scouts are sure to attend that particular meeting. The pack leaders shouldn't require much time from the troop meeting, except perhaps to describe what they require of a den chief and to ask interested Scouts to talk to them during or after the troop meeting. Despite this announcement, the pack visitors should watch the meeting activities, identify Scouts who look like promising den chiefs, and talk briefly to them. The visitor simply needs to approach the Scout, ask for his name, and mention the pack's interest in den chiefs. If the Scout is interested, he will speak to the pack leaders after the meeting.

When the pack leaders meet with Scouts at the end of the meeting, it is best if troop leaders are also present. If there is some reason why a particular Scout might not be approved by the troop to be a den chief, the troop leaders should be able to say so at that time. Otherwise, the pack leaders should be confident that any den chiefs they recruit that evening will be approved by the troop. This end-of-meeting meeting also lets the den leaders and Scouts compare and coordinate schedules. Once schedules are arranged and Scouts are assigned to dens, the meeting is over. The pack and troop may have additional paperwork, though there is no official requirement to give written "commissions" to den chiefs.

Here is a checklist for a pack to arrange a troop visit to recruit den chiefs:

- Den leaders, the Cubmaster, and the pack committee should first agree on special requirements, if any, for den chief appointments.

- Identify a troop that might be able to supply den chiefs. Contact troop leaders and check for interest in placing den chiefs. If the troop is interested, arrange to have a pack representative visit a troop committee meeting.

- At the troop committee meeting, establish any special requirements the troop might have for den chief appointments. Also schedule a troop meeting during which the pack may visit to recruit den chiefs.

- Ensure that the troop lets the Scouts know about the pack visit, to ensure that interested Scouts will attend. Be sure to announce that interested Scouts should bring their schedules, agendas, and/or calendars in order to coordinate with scheduled den and pack meetings.

- The pack representatives attends the troop meeting. Ideally, every den leader who wants to place a den chief should attend the meeting. Begin the meeting with a brief explanation of why the pack is visiting, the requirements for den chiefs, and the intent to select den chiefs after the troop meeting is over.

- Watch the Scouts during the meeting. If den leaders see a promising Scout, they should introduce themselves, note the Scout's name, and mention their interest in finding qualified den chiefs for the pack. The visitors may explicitly ask particular Scouts to stay after and talk to pack leaders about the den chief position.

- Following the meeting, the pack leaders should meet with candidate Scouts accompanied by troop leaders. The pack leaders can ask further questions of candidates and coordinate den

schedules with den chief candidates. The troop leaders in attendance provide approval of the den chief candidates from the trop standpoint.

- When the meeting is finished, den chief positions should have been filled.

3.0 Conclusion

If a pack needs den chiefs and a troop has qualified den chief candidates, then the only obstacle may be the institutional boundaries between units. Commissioners are in the best place to cross those boundaries and to bring the pack and troop leaders together. The units should not have to rely on the commissioner for all den chief placements. Once the unit leaders see how the process works, and participate in it themselves, they should be able to carry on without the commissioner. They simply need the commissioner to ".jump start" the process.

This paper presents three specific strategies for placing den chiefs: the pack introduction, the pack interview, and the troop visit. Since we can't always anticipate which unit will feel the greatest urge to place den chiefs, there are strategies for both pack-initiated and troop-initiated placement. The pack interviews and troop visits are organized primarily by the adult leaders. While this makes them relatively easy to set up, they give the pack leaders less insight into the den chief candidates. In a pack introduction, the Scouts must do something for Cubs at a pack meeting. This more closely addresses their potential role in the den, since they must capture the Cubs' attention and show they can relate to the younger boys. The troop visit also gives den leaders a chance to see the Scouts in action, though this depends on the meeting's activities.

Regardless of how the recruitment takes place, both the pack and troop must agree ahead of time on the requirements and qualifications of den chief candidates. If one or the other wishes to require more than the minimum (i.e. an age range or minimum rank) then they must establish those requirements

before they try to recruit any Scouts. There is no point in talking to a Scout about a den chief position if

he doesn't meet the minimum requirements of the troop or pack.

4.0 Annotated References

This "annotated" list of references includes notes describing the references and why they may -or may not -present accurate information.

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This is the 2001 edition of the official handbook published for Cub Scout leaders.

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Scouter.com (1, 2008) "Den Chief Recruitment," on-line forum discussion #202108, July 2008, http://www.scouter.com/forums/viewThread.asp?threadID=202108, retrieved 20 June 2011.

Scouter.com (2, 2008) "Recruiting Den Chiefs," on-line forum discussion #205853, August 2008, http://www.scouter.com/forums/viewThread.asp?threadID=205853, retrieved 20 June 2011.

There were two on-line forum discussions within a month of one another about den chief recruiting. The discussion postings appear to reflect actual experience with den chief recruitment and placement.

Scouting.org I (201 1) "History of Cub Scouting," http://www.scouting.org/scoutsource/ CubScouts/Parents/About/history.aspx, retrieved 20 July 2011.

> *This material is published by the National Council and is presumed to be accurate unless otherwise contradicted.*

Snowden, Jeff (2010) "A Brief History of the Boy Scouts of America," http://www.troop97.net/ bsahist1.htm, retrieved 20 July 2011.

> *This on-line history is accompanied by a list of references – they are all respectable secondary sources on scouting history.*

Troop 216 (2000), "Den Chief Leadership Smart Book," privately published, Glen Carbon, IL, February 2000.

> *This is a useful example of some den chief selection recommendations turned into actual rules.*

Ulicki, Bob (2004), "Den Chief Leader's Guide," privately published, December 2004.

> *This appears to be a guide developed by an adult leader for his pack and/or troop's use. It distills a lot of common sense about the den chief role.*

Willis, Chuck (2010) *Boy Scouts of America: A Centennial History,* Irving, TX: Boy Scouts of America.

> *This is the authorized centennial history published by the National Council and is presumed to be an authoritative secondary source.*