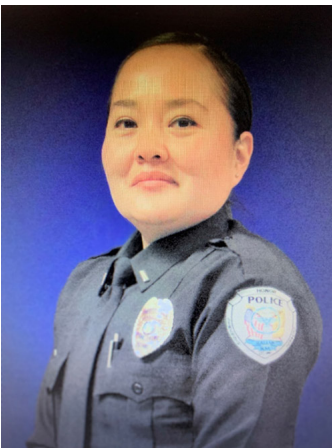


Solving the police shortage problem

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Assignment Editor
Friday, 28 October 2022 03:33



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The GPD currently has 10 vacancies they're trying to fill.

This is not something that is unique to the Gallup Police Department. Police departments across the country have been experiencing staffing issues.

According to a Police Executive Research Forum done in June 2021, police agencies are only filling 93% of their authorized positions. Part of this is due to a 5% decrease in the amount of new officers being hired. Another factor is that there was a 45% increase in the retirement rate. Officers are retiring faster than departments can hire new recruits.

In an interview with the *Sun*, Gallup Police Captain Erin Toadlena-Pablo said that in the next three to five years, more than 10 officers will become eligible to retire from the GPD.

Retirement is not the only reason people are leaving law enforcement careers or not even wanting to start one.

Toadlena-Pablo listed multiple reasons why she believes the national police shortage is happening. She mentioned competitive pay and burnout as just a couple of reasons people may not want to become police officers.

She explained that at the GPD, officers often don't get many breaks between calls.

"The Gallup Police Department is very busy. We run calls non-stop, and on our days off they're in court or they're in training," Toadlena-Pablo said. "So there's really not that time to recuperate or recover, and then you're back out on the streets. So I think a lot of it has to do with having that idea of 'Okay, I want to be a police officer to go out and help, but then I also want to maintain my personal life with my family.'"

She also explained how COVID-19 impacted staffing at the department.

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“When COVID came along it was something that was unknown, and we’re on the frontlines with a lot of the medical personnel,” Toadlena-Pablo said. “So we lost a lot of people here at the Gallup Police Department who didn’t want to have contact with that. They were very afraid of that.”

Additionally, lack of housing and an unreliable healthcare system, she said, are a couple of more reasons that make Gallup a less attractive choice for potential recruits.

Similar to the GPD, McKinley County Sheriff’s Office is facing staffing shortages.

Undersheriff James Maiorano III told the *Sun* that the Sheriff’s Office currently has nine open positions. He said to be fully staffed the office would have 42 deputies, and right now they only have 31 on staff.

A BAD REPUTATION

Maiorano attributes the eradication of qualified immunity and civil liability as another reasons folks may shy away from a career in law enforcement.

Qualified immunity is used to protect police officers from seemingly frivolous lawsuits. But opponents argue it’s been used to protect bad cops.

In order for a person to sue a police officer, they have to prove that the officer’s conduct was illegal and that the officer should have known they were violating clearly established law(s).

In April 2021, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed the New Mexico Civil Rights Act, which effectively banned qualified immunity. New Mexico was the second state to ban the law; Colorado did it in June 2020.

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The national law enforcement reputation also saw a decline after protests broke out across the nation in response to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

According to a June 2020 survey done by Gallup, a global analytics and advice firm that helps leaders and organizers solve their most pressing problems, only 48% of the people surveyed had a “great deal of confidence” in the police.

“Law enforcement has kind of received a bad reputation nationwide, and we don’t see the interest in the profession like we used to,” Maiorano said. “People are worried that if they take the job to serve and protect that they might end up in jail or losing their personal property or be targeted for ridicule or harassment.”

FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Besides the bad reputation, Maiorano also noted that law enforcement agencies have been hit with the same problem as other employers across the country — a lack of qualified applicants.

“There used to be 50 to 60 people competing for just a few openings, and that wasn’t that long ago,” Maiorano said. “Now we’re only seeing a few applicants putting in for large shortages. So there seems to be a lack of people who are motivated to get into professions, and I think that’s affecting a lot of the trades, not just law enforcement specifically.”

Maiorano and Toadlena-Pablo both said their offices reach out to high schools and colleges for recruitment purposes, and they attend as many local job fairs as possible. Maiorano also noted that people who have just come out of the military make good potential hires for law enforcement positions.

Neither the GPD nor MCSO offer hiring bonuses. MCSO currently pays a certified deputy \$21 an hour, and an uncertified deputy \$18.50 an hour. GPD pays an uncertified police officer \$17.43 an hour, and a certified officer at least \$22.65, and more depending on how long the

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officer has been part of a law enforcement agency.

Maiorano said the MCSO has no plans to increasing their pay any time soon.

“We don’t want to hike our pay, and then have Gallup Police Department hike their pay, and end up in a wage war where we’re taking each other’s officers, because there’s still only the same amount of law enforcement officers in the community,” Maiorano explained. “So that’s not actually helping the community.”

He said he would rather hire new recruits coming out of high school, college, or the military to “beef up” the law enforcement entities rather than having people jumping from one of the local law enforcement entities to the other. He said the jumping around could lead to exhaustion.

In addition, Toadlena-Pablo said that the GPD recently lost two officers to the Albuquerque Police Department because the bigger city can offer higher pay.

FINANCIAL HELP

But, the GPD is getting some financial help from the state.

On Sept. 9, Lujan Grisham announced that over \$40 million from the Law Enforcement Recruitment Fund would be used to hire over 300 new officers at 29 departments across New Mexico.

According to a press release published by the governor’s office, the GPD will receive just over \$1.3 million of that amount, which will be disbursed over the next three years.

During the Oct. 11 city council meeting, GPD Chief Franklin Boyd explained how the money

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would be disbursed.

\$750,000 will be given to the department in the first year, which will help hire 10 new officers at \$75,000 a year each. In 2023, the department will receive \$375,000, and in 2024 they will receive \$187,500.

Boyd said that the money has to be used by a specific date. The first round of funds has to be spent by June 30, 2023; the second will be dispersed in July 2023, and must be spent by June 30, 2024; and the final installment will be sent in July 2024 and must be spent by June 2025.

The first allocation would be distributed within five business days of when the city council approves the agreement.

Councilor Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, asked Boyd if GPD would be able to spend the full amounts in the allotted time, especially since they would only have eight months to spend the first allotment of \$750,000.

Boyd responded, and said it's unlikely that the department would be able to spend all of the money. Any leftover money that is not spent by each deadline will be returned to the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration.

The council unanimously voted to sign the agreement.

As for the MCSO, Maiorano said he was unsure if they would be getting any financial help from the state but said he's looking into it.

Recruiting new police officers can certainly be difficult. The amount of training alone may deter some hopefuls.

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Toadlena-Pablo said that it takes a new hire about 10 months to officially be allowed out into the field.

The Police Academy, where new officers become certified, doesn't hold classes every month, which contributes to the delay. Toadlena-Pablo said the next round of classes starts in January. New recruits spend about six months at the academy. If a new hire comes in when the academy isn't holding classes, they are allowed to help around the department until they become certified, but they can't run any calls.

After the police academy, the new hire has to complete three months of being a field training officer. They spend those three months shadowing a senior officer to get a handle on what it's like working in the field.

Maiorano said that new hires also have to pass a physical exam, psychological standards, medical standards, and a written test to get hired.

Despite the long hours, demanding workload, and the mental and physical strain, Toadlena-Pablo said it's all worth it.

"When I think about it, some people out there want to experience something challenging and something new. Every day that you get up and you come into work and you put on that uniform, you're going to experience something different," Toadlena-Pablo said.

She explained that one day an officer can be investigating a traffic crash, the next day they could be investigating a homicide case, or find a missing person.

"There's never a dull moment, you're always going to be busy, you're going to learn a lot, you're going to meet a lot of different people, and some of these people you make contact with, you could change their lives [and] at some point have some sort of inspiration on this individual to change or maybe to open their eyes to 'hey there may be something better out there for me,'" Toadlena-Pablo said.

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