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County decision to pare benefits leaves Sheriff's Department scrambling to fill positions, manage overtime

The Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department is paying thousands of dollars in overtime each week to cover vacancies brought on by the sudden and unexpected departure of seven deputies late last year, Undersheriff Jim Johnson said.

The deputies' decisions, which officials said can be attributed to changes in their fringe benefits approved by the County Board last year, combined with anticipated staffing changes, have left the department filling every shift with overtime.

"In the jail, we have overtime shifts every hour, every day," Johnson said. "Effectively today, the Sheriff's Department is down 10 deputies."

That's because the department still hasn't filled three of six positions authorized last summer, he said, adding that the three new workers are still in training.

And the number of vacancies doesn't include three jailer positions vacant since late 2010 when the department closed one pod in its jail because of a shortfall in the prisoner boarding program, he said.

Those positions won't be filled unless the jail population rebounds and the pod is reopened, Johnson said.

Nancy Szatkowski, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, said Wednesday that the sudden resignation and retirements are "an unintended result" of the county's decision to reduce benefits for deputies.

"The sheriff warned us that if we did it, deputies would leave, and they did," she said. "I think the County Board will be surprised so many deputies are leaving and astounded at the amount of overtime it's going to cost.

"I myself did not expect such a degree of exodus. I'm really saddened by the loss of some very good people in the department, and a lot of experience."

Although the Finance and Public Safety committees approved filling the positions Wednesday morning, it could take six months for that to occur, leaving the department to continue paying an estimated $1,000 a day in overtime, Johnson said.

For a department already facing a significant loss of revenue this year as its prisoner

boarding program has all but disappeared, the cost of covering vacancies will be a challenge.

“It’s not budgeted,” Sheriff Maury Straub said, so the money will likely have to come from the county’s general fund.

It could cost the county $180,000 in overtime pay by the time all the positions are filled, Johnson calculated, and that doesn’t include the cost of overtime to cover shifts for deputies who are ill, on vacation or taking family or military leave.

“This (replacing deputies) is not a quick process. We want the right people to protect the community,” Johnson said, noting the process includes testing, interviews and background checks, as well as psychiatric, medical and drug screenings.

After the positions are filled, deputies receive about 12 weeks of training before they begin work, he said.

But before this occurs, the county will have to advertise for people to fill the posts. The eligibility list of about 15 candidates that the county typically starts its job search with is virtually depleted, Johnson said.

“We lost 15 people in 2012,” Straub said. “That’s unheard of.”

It is tough for a department that’s already “staffed tight,” Johnson said, noting a study done last year showed that Ozaukee County is staffed at the minimum levels in its patrol and jail operations.

“We’re hoping that people don’t get burned out,” he said. “That’s a lot of overtime to fill.”

Johnson said he began hearing rumors of deputies who might leave after the county approved changes to their benefit package last year, so he wasn’t completely surprised when resignations began crossing his desk.

“I expected people to leave,” he said. “But not this quick, and not at this level.”

Typically, deputies give a month’s notice for retirements, he said, even though the contract only requires a two-week notice.

In this case, he said, they gave only the two-week notice.

“Some of these guys are early retirements,” Johnson said. “None of these people planned on retiring this year. These were unexpected retirements.”

Their motivation is obvious, Johnson said.

“Benefit changes,” he said.

Last year, the county significantly increased the health insurance deductible for deputies and made changes to their medication plan, a move officials said was taken to make up for the fact that they receive $10,000 more in compensation each year compared to other county employees.

And in the jail, where many of the last-minute retirements and a resignation occurred, the county decided last year not to classify workers as protected staff members.

The effect for these non-protected employees is two-fold, Johnson said. The age when they can retire is changed, and the county will only pay 12% to the state for their retirements benefits, with the employee contributing half that amount.

For employees classified as protected, the retirement contribution is 19% and the county pays the entire amount.

Johnson said he doesn’t know if that fact will hamper efforts to hire new employees.

“I would assume so,” he said. “When you’re looking for a job, the benefits are something you look at.”