

Requirements for hiring patrol officers eased

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Sheriff waives rule for one-year service on jail staff in effort to fill seven unexpected department vacancies

Sheriff Maury Straub on Tuesday said he is waiving one of the requirements for patrol officers as he struggles to fill seven unexpected vacancies, most of which resulted from the county's decision to cut jailor's benefits.

Straub told the Public Safety Committee that he is not requiring deputies to serve in the jail for a year before being promoted to patrol duties.

"That's due to necessity," Straub said.

Two of the nine vacancies left to be filled are in the patrol division, but only one eligible jailor applied for the job, Straub said.

"I would have thought we would have many more people who wanted to get out of the jail," he told the committee.

The reasons deputies don't want to move to the patrol division are many, Straub said. For instance, jailors working the day shift may not want to become patrol officers because they will likely be assigned to third-shift duties.

By allowing all jailors to apply for the vacant positions in the patrol division, the pool of potential officers increases significantly, Straub said.

"We have some very good, young deputies in the jail," he said.

If he still has trouble filling the positions, Straub said, he will have to look at other alternatives, perhaps hiring patrol officers from outside the department and eliminating the requirement they start their job in the jail.

"I have a job to do," he said. "The people of this county expect me to provide public safety. I have to find the people to do that."

Hiring two patrol officers won't solve the department's vacancy problem, Straub noted. That's because these two positions are being filled from within the department, leaving two more vacancies in the jail staff.

The Public Safety Committee on Tuesday approved an eligibility list of a dozen candidates to fill the vacancies.

While it may seem like the list will be adequate for the department to hire people to fill the nine vacancies, that's not necessarily the case, Undersheriff Jim Johnson said.

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The department's last eligibility list had 15 candidates, only four of whom were hired by the department, he said.

Others on the list may have been hired by other departments before the county offered them a job, he said, or they may have failed the background check or the required psychiatric, medical and drug screenings.

Straub said he may ask the committee to advertise and conduct testing for another eligibility list so he can fill vacancies as quickly as possible if the department exhausts the new list.

Straub said the number of vacancies in the sheriff's department is "unprecedented."

"We've never had this many positions to hire and train," he said. "It's going to take us a long time to get through this process."

At the end of last year, seven deputies unexpectedly quit or retired — a decision officials said is a direct result of changes in their fringe benefits approved by the County Board.

The county significantly increased the health insurance deductible for deputies and made changes to their medication plan.

The county also decided not to classify workers in the jail as protected staff members. This not only changes the age at which they can retire, it also limits how much the county will pay for their retirement benefits.

For non-protected workers, the county will pay only 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.

To cover the vacancies in the department, officers are working overtime during every shift at a cost of at least \$1,000 a day, Straub said.

It could take six months to fill all the vacancies, he said, noting that even after deputies are hired, they must undergo 14 weeks of training before they can begin working.

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,” Straub said. “We’re looking forward to months and months of extended shifts.”