

The Register-Guard

Eugene police chief orders review of patrol operations

By Christian Hill

Posted Jul 6, 2018 at 4:57 AM

Updated Jul 6, 2018 at 11:31 AM

Chief Chris Skinner says he's looking for ways to improve nonemergency responses

Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner has told his department brass to look at revamping patrol operations so officers can handle nonemergency calls more often and more quickly.

Skinner, two months into his new job, said during an hour-long interview Tuesday that he planned to review the options in the coming weeks and to implement any changes this fall.

Skinner said he's concerned with data gathered by his predecessor and presented to the City Council earlier this year that show supervisors disregarded one-third of the average daily calls — deemed low priority — that the department received last year because there are far more calls than officers on duty.

And when they do respond to service calls, the data showed, it took longer for officers to reach the scene as the average response time had jumped to 41.8 minutes last year from 22.5 minutes in 2014.

The police chief said no department “answers 100 percent of all these calls for service” but he's looking for ideas to make better, more efficient use of his force both to address community concerns and to look after his officers' welfare.

He said the department has made the police union aware of the review because it could involve changes to officers' schedules.

“Everybody has really been open to taking a look at a different way of doing business,” Skinner said.

The police chief said the department is evaluating where and when to redeploy police officers as well as examining minimum staffing levels.

The review comes as the city undertakes a broader look at challenges facing its criminal justice system, which could result in a funding measure put before voters in a future election. City officials say the 911 dispatch center and city prosecutor’s office need more employees to respond to greater demand. In addition, the cost for the city to rent jail beds from Lane County and Springfield continues to climb.

Patrick Willis, a Eugene police detective and union officer, said changes to the department’s existing patrol force alone won’t make a significant dent in the problems facing the department.

“Ultimately, we have to significantly increase the amount of police officers we have, the amount of dispatchers we have and all the support professional staff that we have,” he said.

David James, who temporarily led Eugene police before Skinner’s arrival, told city councilors in February that Eugene’s population and volume of service calls are outpacing its existing force.

To maintain the current staffing rate of 1.14 officers per 1,000 residents into 2022, James said the department would need to hire nine more officers during the next five years. And he indicated that staffing rate is a bit low, requiring more hiring to raise it.

Those numbers account for all sworn officers, not just patrol officers. The department has 192 sworn officers, including about 120 patrol officers. There are currently eight vacancies in the patrol ranks.

The department recently announced it is accelerating its hiring process for officers to 90 days from 180 days, with applications accepted at all times rather than during certain periods.

Skinner said he expects 12 to 14 sworn officers to retire next year so the department needs to be ready with new officers to fill those positions.

The police chief said it's rare for a large police force to be completely staffed at any one time due to retirements, promotions and resignations.

"There will be a period of time where I'll probably be able to pound my chest and say, 'We're fully staffed,'" he said. "And then the next week we won't be. That's just the way it works in an agency this big."