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Eugene PD steps up recruiting

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The department is focused on hiring more officers with an eye on attitude and efficiency

While Eugene's population has grown by more than 6,000 since 2015, the city's police department ranks have decreased by one sworn officer.

Additionally, in the last five years, 911 calls have grown by 21 percent while the average wait time for a response to these calls has increased by 20 minutes. And, the number of calls police are unable to respond to also has grown — from 59 per day in 2014 to more than 80 per day in 2017, an increase of about 36 percent.

As a result, Eugene Police Department is unable to respond — due to lack of patrol resources — to one out of three calls, such as car break-ins or thefts, that don't involve a crime in progress.

It's a problem Chief Chris Skinner, who started May 2, has been working to rectify by getting more officers patrolling Eugene's streets. Not only is Skinner seeking more sworn officers, but he also is looking to hire a certain type of officer — one that is more empathetic who will work with the community while serving and protecting it.

Eugene police already have hired 13 new recruits, who began their training early this month. Ten of these recruits are brand new to policing and won't begin duty as sworn solo officers for another year, but three recruits, who are transferring from other Oregon law enforcement agencies, are expected to begin serving Nov. 26.

"That basically brings us up to full staff for the first time in I don't know how long," Skinner said in a recent interview with The Register-Guard.

In September, the Eugene City Council committed to funding November's recruiting class and other critical measures with \$8.6 million in "bridge funding," a one-time, 18-month funding strategy councilors likely will pass as part of the supplemental budget in December. City councilors also kicked off discussions that would buoy the public safety budget by up to \$22.8 million. Some of this money would fund additional recruiting classes scheduled to begin Jan. 7 and April 7.

"Now it's my job to just make sure we hire the right people, and give them some direction and hold them accountable, and make sure they are fiercely protective of the relationship that we have with the community," Skinner said.

The work to change recruiting practices began before Skinner took office. In 2016, Eugene contracted the Police Executive Research Forum "to conduct a review of the Eugene Police Department's work environment as it pertains to women and minorities (both sworn and civilian), particularly with respect to the agency's policies and practices regarding hiring, promotion, and assignment to special units."

The organization's October 2017 findings found that the police department's interview process was excluding good candidates due to a lack of an applicant's specialized knowledge. For example, an incorrect answer to a question from the written test asking about what an off-duty officer's responsibility would be if they were coincidentally at the scene of a crime-in-progress could result in exclusion of a candidate, Lt. Ron Tinseth said.

"This question doesn't go to a candidate's character and the answer can be taught and trained," said Tinseth, who assumed responsibility for police recruiting in January. This goes to the department's new focus on hiring for attitude. "We can't teach someone the right character, but we can teach them how to be a cop."

Bringing in high-character recruits who want to connect with the community while keeping it safe, however, has proven to be a challenge for the department, especially at a time when the national culture leaves local departments under a great deal of scrutiny and police officers find their jobs more onerous and more hazardous.

Several national high-profile, fatal incidents involving blacks — and in particular black men — have sparked calls for reform across the country. As a result, 86 percent of police officers surveyed in a Pew Research Center national police study found their job more difficult and 93 percent found their job more dangerous.

In this environment, Eugene police have found it more difficult to recruit. One way the department is combating the problem has been to focus on efficiency in the hiring process.

“The same standards and screening are maintained, the process is just streamlined,” Tinseth said. “For example, instead of (job candidates) visiting three to four times from Boise, you can just come here once and if you come back, there’s a conditional job offer waiting for you.”

The department’s recruiting team has pared down a six- to eight-month hiring process to 90 days by focusing on hiring regional recruits (within an eight-hour drive), reducing time screening applicant test results, decreasing the amount of recruit visits and bringing in more recruits from other Oregon law enforcement agencies.

“We are competing against hire dates,” said Lt. Angie San Miguel, head of training and internal affairs in Eugene. “If a candidate receives an offer from say Bend, (he/she) could sign on before we extend our own offer.”

To reduce the time to identify qualified applicants, the department holds more tests for smaller groups. Testing more applicants not only allows the department to hire more officers but also allows them to require more qualified officers, according to Tinseth.

“We’re going after high performers. We want people who can be empathetic and well-spoken who want to connect with Eugene’s community,” Tinseth said. “This includes trying to hire college grads, military veterans and people with significant life experience.”