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Columbia police staffing remains a problem, officers and officials say

BY KELSI ANDERSON Mar 21, 2015



Jenny Justus

Columbia Police Sgt. Michael Hester, left, and Officers Lindsey Mueller, center, and Robert Fox hold a brief meeting Thursday at the Columbia Police Station before heading out to patrol the streets.

COLUMBIA — It was noon on Thursday when Columbia Police Officers Lindsey Mueller and Robert Fox joined Sgt. Michael Hester for a shift meeting at the Police Department headquarters. Mueller and Fox, who have 10 and nine years of experience on the force, respectively, were getting ready to head out on patrol and were about to be briefed about what they might expect.

Mueller and Fox would bring the total number of officers on patrol at that time in Columbia to 12.

"That's 12 officers to cover 68 square miles," Hester said, "so divide all the city's problems by 12."

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Mueller said being spread so thin can make things hectic.

"It depends on the day, but for the most part it's call to call, with calls waiting on us while we're handling a call," Mueller said.

"So for these guys, a child abuse call, for instance, would be a big deal," Hester said. "They have to write a report and do an investigation, and there's five, 10, 20 calls waiting for them — and it all has to be done at the end of their shift."

City officials for years have been decrying what they say is serious understaffing at the Columbia Police Department, caused by a lack of money to hire more police officers. The challenge has been a prominent topic during the City Council election season, with nearly all of the 13 candidates saying the city needs to find a way to beef up the force.

Mayor Bob McDavid and others have blamed eroding sales tax revenue caused by an increase in Internet sales, saying that has taken a heavy toll on the city's ability to match police numbers with Columbia's growth, in terms of both size and population. City voters in November, however, rejected Proposition 1, a bill that would have raised property taxes to pay for 15 new firefighters and 40 new police officers over five years.

As it stands, the Police Department employs 163 sworn officers, spokeswoman Bryana Maupin said. Given the fiscal 2015 budget's projection of a Columbia population of 119,476 people, that adds up to 1.36 sworn police officers per 1,000 residents. The result is longer emergency response times and little time left over for officers to devote to proactive and community policing methods.

A Police Department study cited in the 2015 budget says that in order for officers to devote a third of their time to community policing, the department would need 19 to 30 additional officers.

The MU Police Department, meanwhile, employs 35 police officers, with an authorized strength of 37, MU Police Capt. Brian Weimer told the Missourian. Adding those 35 officers would bring the ratio to 1.65 per 1,000 residents.

City Manager Mike Matthes said the situation is critical.

"We are as thinly staffed as we can possibly be and still function," Matthes said. He recounted a meeting with Deputy Chief Jill Schlude during which he asked her to check her iPad to see how many on-duty officers would be available if a call came in.

"It was zero, at 10 o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. Imagine what it was gonna be at 11 o'clock that night or 2 a.m. on a Friday," Matthes said.

Of the 163 sworn officers on the police force, 82 are patrol officers, Maupin said. Of those, three are in the academy and three are in field training. The department also has five officer vacancies.

The failure of Proposition 1 left the city with no means to boost police numbers.

"Property tax is always a hard sell," Matthes said. He suspected voters would prefer a sales tax but the city opted against that because the "slow starvation" of sales tax revenue would leave Columbia in the same position 10 years down the road.

"I believe in a year or two we're going to have to ask (for a property tax increase) again," Matthes said.

Response to unfavorable department review

The Police Department has faced challenges beyond staff numbers. A 2012 independent review of the Columbia Police Department by Eric Anderson Associates detailed a dismal account of low police morale, lack of communication and a supervisory culture that was "approaching toxicity."

The report listed 14 recommendations for improving the department. They included fostering communication, addressing pay compression, establishing a fair internal justice system and improving training efforts. Matthes said the city is "pretty well done" with all the recommendations, except the accreditation of the department, which is an ongoing process.

"The fundamental problem was with the command staff," Matthes said about the report's findings. "I pulled them all in and talked to them. ... They admitted they'd never given Chief (Ken) Burton five minutes of respect, and they'd been undermining him since Day One."

To address the issue, Matthes said, the city moved down the line at which employees are "at will," or able to be terminated without a stated justification. That ability now rests with both the deputy chief and the assistant chief.

"It's just a command and control function," Matthes said. "Say if I'm your manager and I can't fire you, then you can do whatever you're passionate about and you don't have to listen to me," Matthes said. "There needs to be one police chief, not 10."

"That seems to have fixed a lot of the insubordination," Matthes said. He also believes efforts to improve communication between command staff and the rest of the department are a primary factor that helped "move the needle."

Matthes said he is satisfied with the direction of the Police Department. "I really believe we've turned the corner on the culture side of it and the communication side of it."

New police buildings

Construction of a new police headquarters was among 14 recommendations in the department review, and the city's 2014 draft of its Capital Improvement Plan included potential projects to build two new police station facilities. The draft Capital Improvement Plan for 2016 includes a preliminary design for a municipal service center that could include a police precinct station north of Interstate 70.

The long-term goal would be for the department to have a north precinct and a south precinct as well as a central headquarters.

If the municipal service center is going to happen, the City Council will have to leave it in the Capital Improvement Plan, and voters will have to renew the city's capital improvements sales tax later this year.

"We would co-locate our stuff to be near each other, and the precinct is part of the municipal service center concept. We have the need for a police presence on the north side," Matthes said.

As for the downtown headquarters, Matthes said the department has outgrown it.

"But we can get away with that because officers spend all of their time out of the office going call to call to call,".

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