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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

Albany's plan to increase number of female police officers

Maddie Pfeifer

May 7, 2023

It only took a few ride-alongs for Gina Bell to realize she was interested in a career in law enforcement. She was working as a personal trainer and fitness manager in California, and one of her clients was a police officer.

As it turned out, one female cop ended up inspiring another woman to join the force — whose ranks are predominantly male. Bell is an officer at the Albany Police Department and a member of the regional SWAT team.

Women make up about 12% of sworn police officers in the United States, according to FBI data. The number of women in leadership roles within police agencies is even smaller, coming in at 3%.

Albany police Chief Marcia Harnden is a member of that tiny class. And she's committed to increasing female representation in her department. That's why APD has signed on to the "30x30 pledge," a national initiative to increase the representation of sworn female officers to 30% on police forces by 2030.



Albany police officer Gina Bell said she was intimidated when she first joined the police force. Now, she's a member of the regional SWAT team.

Raleigh Emerson, Mid-Valley Media

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One other agency in Linn and Benton counties, the Oregon State University Police, has also signed on. The university's public safety department/police force is also led by a woman, Shanon Anderson.

Other departments in the state that have signed the pledge include Oregon State Police, Salem PD, Grants Pass PD, University of Oregon Police and the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

"Gender is not what gets you in the door; it's the quality of the person that gets you in the door," Harnden said. "But we want to make sure that women who have the drive to serve the public, are critical thinkers and have good empathy and good emotional intelligence (are) welcome in our department."

Bell is a part of the 16% of APD's sworn officers who are women.

While APD is already above the national average and committed to increasing its current staff of female officers, Harnden emphasized that the pledge is not about a quota — it's a goal. She's looking at quality candidates, no matter the gender.

"We believe that diversity makes us stronger," she said. "So that's really kind of our push there."

Potential barriers

This month, Harnden marks 30 years in law enforcement. She said she had many women before her pave the path, and she was fortunate to have support over the years.

Her initial aspiration was to become a teacher. Although she was physically fit enough to pass all the tests to join the police force, she thought she was too small. But Harnden said she had mentors who told her not to buy into old stereotypes.

“Some are self-imposed obstacles,” Harnden said. “We feel we have to be perfect or we feel we have to be able to do everything the guys do, and that's just not the case.”

Bell faced some of her own self-doubt when becoming a cop, saying she was intimidated in the early years of her career.

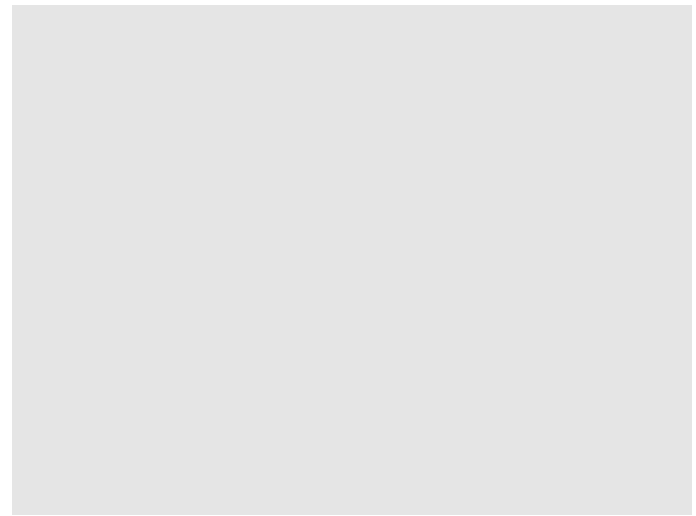
“I remember thinking things like, ‘I need to fit in, I need to wear these certain clothes,’” Bell said. “I remember contemplating whether or not I should put makeup on my face because I didn't know if I did, (they) would take me seriously.”

Bell said her field training officers helped her get comfortable and to bring out her innate confidence.

But she also felt intimidated when she applied to be on the regional SWAT team. At the time, there were no other women on the team.

“I worked my butt off coming up to the application process because there's a physical portion of the process,” Bell said. “I remember doing push-ups everyday because that's part of it, and for the men it's really easy for them to knock those out. But for me, it wasn't, even with a background in fitness.”

Bell stands at 5 feet, 2 inches, but that didn't stop her from making the team. Harnden said Bell stood out among the other applicants to the SWAT team.



Albany Police Chief Marcia Harnden

Mid-Valley Media (File 2020)

“I overcame it and got that position that I was striving for, which was a really good feeling,” Bell said. “And I think in the back of my mind, throughout these internal dilemmas that I have, I constantly think, ‘Hey, you're here for a reason. You are in this position and got here just like everybody else did.’”

Family obligations

Another barrier that may prevent women from joining the police force or may play a role in why they leave the job is family. Harnden said women tend to be the partner who leaves a career to focus on family — a move she can't fault.

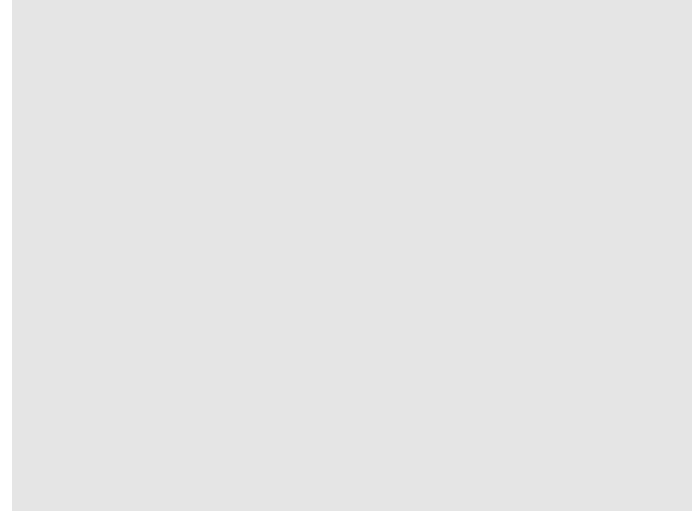
She added that being a single parent can also pose challenges to maintaining a police career.

Bell was the first officer in years to get pregnant at APD, she said.

“They had to kind of fix/change/alter the policy because they were kind of playing it by ear with me and didn't know when I should go on light duty. There was no structure to that,” she said.

“So I kind of helped with that policy and created a new normal for any future officers who became pregnant.”

Now a mother of three, Bell's partner is an Oregon State Police trooper. She said she has always felt a maternal pull and wants to be with her kids. For example, if one of her kids is sick, she'll call out sick too. She joked that she has also taken on the “team mom” role at APD and is happy to do so.



Women make up about 12% of sworn police officers in the United States. Around 16% of the Albany Police Department's sworn officers are women.

Raleigh Emerson, Mid-Valley Media

A female advantage

In her three-decade long career, Harnden said she's been lucky to have encouragement along her journey up the ladder. But she didn't always believe she'd be a chief.

"It's a matter of finding your niche in a career and building your skills around that and really being as good at the job as you can be," she said. "If I said that there weren't still higher hills to climb for women than men, I would be lying. They're still out there. But I think we're making slow and steady progress."

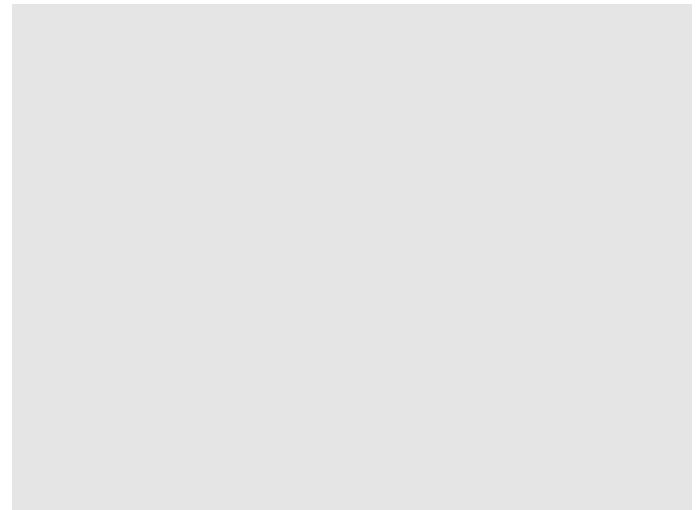
While some barriers may still exist, women may actually have biological advantages when it comes to being a cop.

Harnden said women tend to develop emotional intelligence in their 20s faster than men, and female officers tend to use less force and use less excessive force. She said men and women often approach some scenarios differently.

"This job is way more about (your mind) than it is about guns and beating people up," she said. "You have to be able to do that if need be, but it's about how you interact with people."

Bell said she tries to approach encounters with the community while on the job with a certain level of empathy. She said she remains professional but also thinks of the people she makes contact with as her own family members.

"I am a firm believer that we all deserve respect, and I would say that that motherly figure inside of me definitely helps with that," Bell said.



Albany police officer Gina Bell balances police work while raising three children. Her husband is also in law enforcement.

Raleigh Emerson, Mid-Valley Media

Women in law enforcement

Harnden and Bell both said their male counterparts in law enforcement have been supportive, and they've been able to look up to other female cops who have gone before them.

They acknowledge, however, community members can hold onto traditional views on policing.

Bell said she often gets told she doesn't look old enough to be a cop. But looks can be deceiving.

"It's called command presence — what I've worked on and what I've just had since I started," Bell said. "It's my stance and my face. Even though I'm smiling, I'm still on high alert."

Harnden said she was in a grocery store when a community member saw she was wearing her police lanyard. They asked her if she worked in the records department or dispatch. She told them she was the chief.

Recruitment efforts

Harnden said it's been frustrating for her to not see a lot of women promoted within police departments.

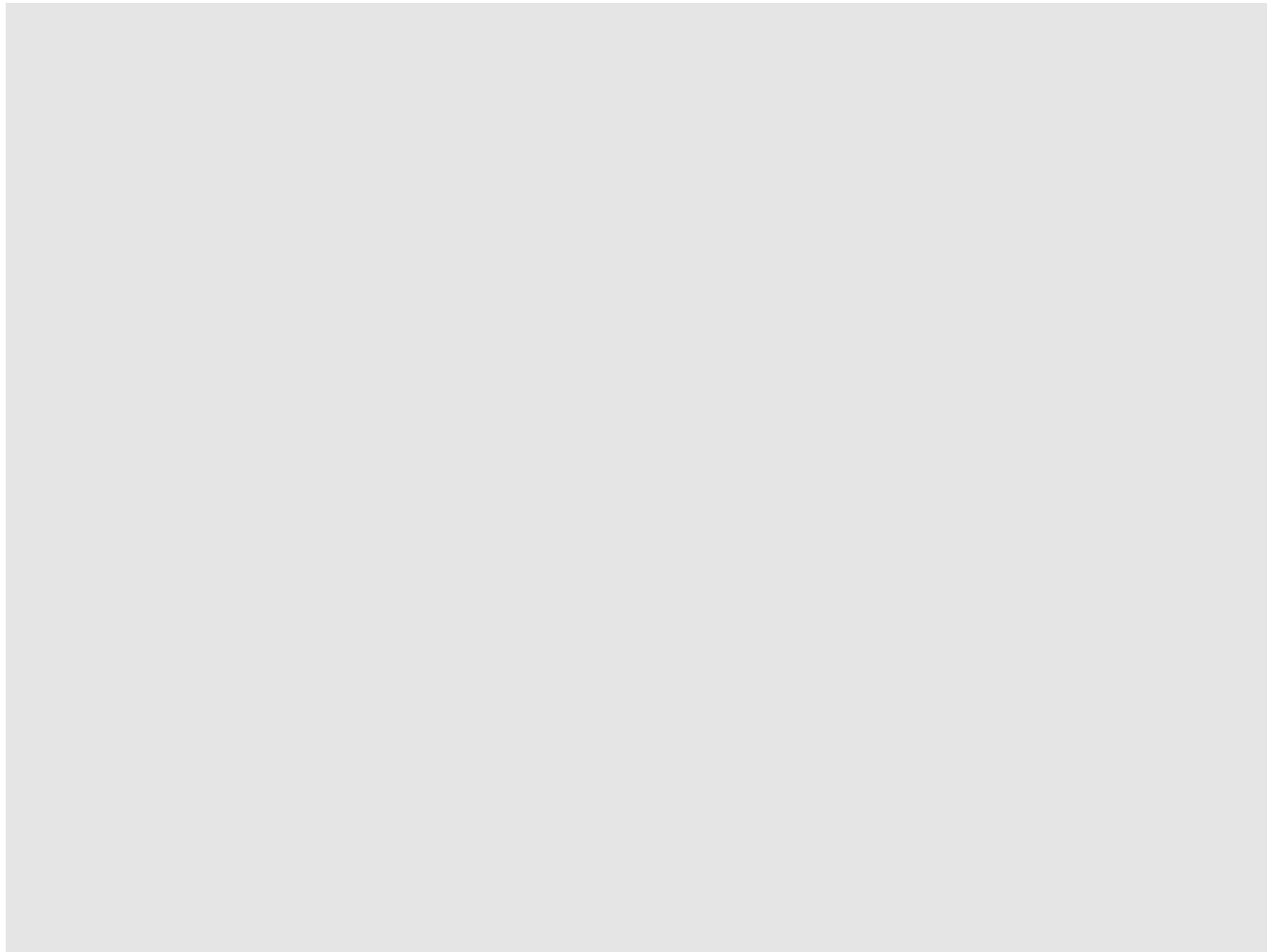
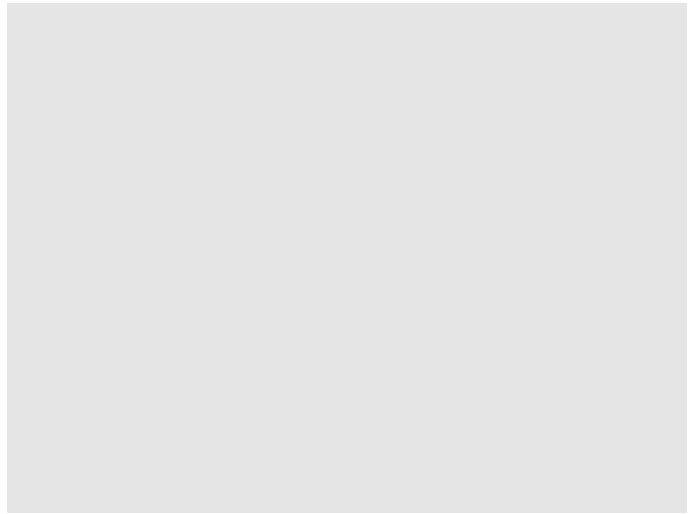
At APD, Harnden doesn't have any female sworn police officers in management or leadership roles following behind her. Shift changes that come with promotions can be complicated for officers with families.

But Harnden hopes that'll change. She's a part of the Northwest Women's Law Enforcement Network, which aims to boost recruitment and promotion of female officers.

APD is also hosting an upcoming women's hiring event in June.

Bell said having Harnden as chief is meaningful for her and the community.

“It's inspiring for other female officers,” she said. “It's inspiring for little girls who are watching her speak in front of others. And it's just a change in what I think is the right direction.”



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Harnden said the pledge and the department's overall goal is to have the police force reflect Albany's own demographics.

“I think most police departments want to be representative of the communities they serve,” she said. “Albany is around 50% women, so why wouldn't you have 50% of your workforce be women?”

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