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ALERT TOP STORY

Mid-valley law enforcement agencies facing staffing shortages

Maddie Pfeifer

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Members of the Corvallis Police Department check on a homeless man camped in Willamette Park during a recent fire. CPD have been experiencing staffing shortages.

Andy Cripe, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

Just this week, city leaders in Lebanon faced the prospect of **sending their chief of police out on patrol** after it was reported recent resignations are making it difficult to staff daily shifts.

They're not the only department dealing with personnel shortages. From officer patrol to corrections to animal control to dispatch, vacancies within various departments at law enforcement agencies across the mid-Willamette valley aren't being filled quickly. Agency leaders say it's not affecting public safety — yet.

“I think we're kind of at that point that, if it gets worse, then we would really see an impact on service,” Linn County Sheriff Michelle Duncan said. “But right now, it's more just an impact on the staff, because they have to work that much harder.”

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“And so I do worry about them and their stress, and that's why we're working so hard to get hiring done.”

LCISO is looking to hire seven patrol deputies, four corrections officers, four dispatchers, as well as a custodian and an animal control officer, Duncan said in a Feb. 1 interview.

Mid-Valley Media contacted a handful of agencies throughout the area in early February. All were managing shortages.

In Benton County, Corvallis Police Department has five patrol openings, public information officer Lt. Gabe Sapp said in a Feb. 7 interview — but that's probably only temporary. That's because officials expect to be down two more by March.

Likewise, Benton County Sheriff Jef Van Arsdall said his agency has five patrol deputy openings as of Feb. 3.

“It's a challenging job and a challenging time, and so as a result, maybe the applicant or candidate pool is a little bit shallower,” Van Arsdall said. “But there's still a lot of folks that want to do this and get into this profession.”

A growing trend

Law enforcement staffing shortages aren't something new. The general consensus among local police departments is that it has been a trend for at least a few years, and vacancies are the result of a variety of factors, including retirement, media portrayal of police, the pandemic and more.

As employees age, retirement has played an even larger role in the growing number of vacancies, according to the agencies. The result at LCSO, Duncan said, is a complete shift in demographics.

“We went from a very veteran, older experienced staff to now our staff — just patrol for example — probably three-quarters of our staff has five years or less experience,” she said.

Beyond retirement, some officers are leaving to jump to other agencies or exiting the field altogether, making retention and hiring more important than ever. The scramble to plug the holes is on.

In one year, since February 2021, Albany Police Department has hired nine officers, Capt. Brad Liles said. In a normal year, the department will typically hire about one to three officers, according to Liles. He described the number of officers hired in the last year as “unprecedented.”

And yet, as of Feb. 8, there are three open officer positions and one open dispatch position at Albany PD, Liles said.

An unappealing occupation

Whether by retirement or for greener pastures, that public safety employees are leaving law enforcement agencies is only half the problem. The pace of hiring replacements is another challenge, with implications for those in the field.

“Our calls haven't really slowed down,” Duncan said. “We're still taking those calls, we're still trying to give the public the best service. That's really important to us to not cut any of our services, which is why hiring has probably been my biggest priority since taking over as the sheriff.”

Duncan, who was **sworn in Jan. 3, 2022** as the county's first female sheriff after more than 20 years with LCSO, believes media-influenced public perception of police has shrunk the candidate pool.



“The media has put us in a bad light,” Duncan said. “I truly believe it's the media and the way they portray some things. It's made our profession probably a little less attractive.”

Corvallis' Sapp also credited media scrutiny with dissuading applications and making the occupation less desirable. The department has seen a continual decline in the number of applicants in recent years.

“The national narrative has put us in the spotlight,” he said. “Some of it paints a poor picture of what we do.”

Members of local law enforcement say the negative portrayal of the industry, paired with the job's dangers, leads to the dearth of applicants.

Take Linn County: where since December, there have been four incidents in which officers were allegedly threatened by suspects. In one week alone in December, there were **three separate incidents** in the county where officers were reportedly threatened.

In some of these cases, deputies fired their weapons at the suspect in response to the threats. The most recent incident was **Jan. 26 in Albany**.

Yet another complication

The pandemic is yet another factor hindering agencies' ability to actively recruit candidates for open positions. Officials say state health requirements and recommendations the last two years have made it more difficult to safely and responsibly go out into the community for hiring fairs.

Instead, Van Arsdall said BCSO has relied heavily on social media to get word out about open positions.

At the Linn County Sheriff's Office, Duncan is taking a new approach to hiring events.

On Saturday, Jan. 29, LCSO held an all-day event with the hope of accelerating the hiring process. Duncan said the hiring process can take a long time as applicants must pass background checks, psychological evaluations, written exams, agility tests and interviews. The goal was to push applicants through at least some of the tests, like the Oregon Physical Abilities Test, and interviews during the daylong event.

Duncan said it was a success on multiple fronts.

According to a LCSO Facebook post, the event attracted 35 applicants. There were 21 entry-level patrol applicants, six entry-level correction applicants, two lateral corrections applicants and six applicants for dispatch.

“The benefit that we saw that we really didn't think about until we were in the event is the applicants got a chance to kind of get to know really what the family atmosphere that we have here is,” Duncan said.

Sapp and Liles both said one of the bigger hurdles to hiring is the elongated timeline, from the time they apply to getting officers fully trained and into the field. The process can take up to a year, Sapp said, which – when you factor in continuing retirements and officers making lateral moves to other agencies – doesn't necessarily translate to a full staff out on patrol each day, even if on paper, the agency is fully staffed.

“You can't just hire someone and have them start the next day,” Liles said.

Quality over quantity

The problem isn't that no one is applying to work for the agencies, however. Finding qualified applicants is the struggle, according to the departments.

“When I first got into it in the mid-'90s, I'd go take a test someplace, and there'd be 2,500 applicants for Portland Police Bureau,” Van Arsdall said. “Now, obviously, the pool is a little bit shallower, but everybody's still looking for good, qualified candidates. And so, if I'm a new prospective police candidate, I can apply to a lot of different places and kind of be a little bit pickier. As a result, that has created some hiring challenges.”

All agency representatives stressed wanting to find qualified candidates to fill roles. While staffing shortages are an inconvenience, they don't want to hire someone just for the sake of hiring them.

Duncan said she's seen a lot of applicants interested in the field because of the social work aspect of the job. However, some of these candidates aren't necessarily prepared for the field work or don't anticipate the dangerous aspects of the role, she said.

The agencies said they've seen a mix of lateral applicants and those with less experience.

Competing with other agencies

Those who are interested in law enforcement have a variety of options in the mid-Willamette Valley. Because of this, Duncan said the local agencies are competing with each other for applicants in a way they haven't always had to do.

“I think right now ... all agencies are in a pinch to where they're hurting so much for applicants that you see all these hiring bonuses going around,” Duncan said. “And you have to be kind of competitive with the other agencies.

“But I'm hoping that we're not creating a situation where a law enforcement officer or deputy is going from one agency to another because there's a better hiring bonus.”

With the number of job openings so high, APD's Liles said, local agencies are competing with not just their neighboring departments but with agencies throughout the state.

“We're competing with applicants who have put in applications in Portland, Eugene, and probably the coast too,” Liles said.

Then there's the competition from other industries.

According to the **Oregon Employment Department**, the state's unemployment rate dropped to 4.1% in December 2021. Benton County's unemployment rate sits at 3.1% and Linn County's unemployment rate is 4.6%.

The unemployment rates across the state and local counties are decreasing, but job vacancies are increasing. According to **OED data**, job vacancies were up 88% in the fall 2021 quarter when compared to the fall 2020 quarter.

That tight labor market may play a role in why departments are facing these staffing shortages. There are plenty of employment opportunities in a variety of industries, and many of those jobs allow for remote work — something that's not practical and oftentimes not possible in law enforcement.

“We are competing with the private sector ... where you can work remotely, you can do some different things,” Van Arsdall said. “And that might be attractive to somebody who maybe was on the fence about getting into this profession.”

Keeping communities safe

For the sheriff’s offices in particular, a full working staff is critical. Although BCSO headquarters are based in Corvallis and LCSO’s in Albany, the agencies are the main law enforcement services for some of the smaller, more remote cities within their respective counties.

These smaller towns are the ones that may be most at risk of feeling the impacts of staffing shortages.

However, Van Arsdall, who often attends city county council meetings for Benton County towns, said the community seems to be content with the agency’s services.

“They're happy with the service they're receiving,” he said. “If I go to a meeting and find out they're not, then we need to start addressing some stuff. But currently, it sure seems like everybody's pretty pleased with the services they're receiving from this office.”

Heading in the right direction

Despite the shortages, law enforcement agencies are hopeful for the near future.

As of Feb. 3, Van Arsdall said he had four job offers on the table to BCSO candidates.

“That's about as many as I could do at a time simply from a training standpoint,” he said. “I’m hoping to possibly have another process here shortly for that fifth spot, but I have to space it because I don't have enough training deputies.”

While job vacancies still exist, the ability to fill these positions — albeit at a slower pace than in the past — seems to signal a desire to protect and serve is still alive.

A hopeful future

Duncan's teenage daughter is interested in following in her mom's footsteps. While her daughter was in middle school, Duncan full-heartedly encouraged her child to enter the field she herself has grown to love.

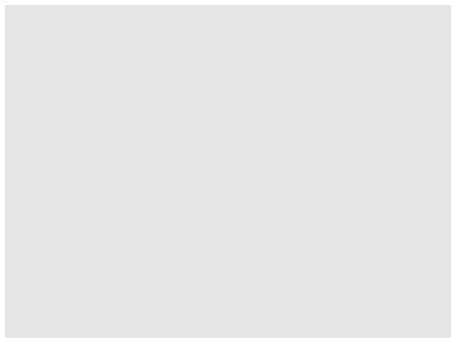
But the last few years have been tough, Duncan said. She has even questioned whether to support her daughter's aspiration.

"We had the last couple of years where it seemed like law enforcement can't do anything right," she said. "And it gave me pause, worrying about her in this profession."

But Duncan said she still believes in this job and the cause. And her daughter, now a senior in high school, plans to go to college and study law enforcement.

"At the end of the day, I have to say that I still believe in this profession," she said. "And we still need really good people wanting to do it for the right reasons. After I thought about it long and hard, I'll do nothing but encourage her to do this."

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Benton County Sheriff Jef Van
Arsdall

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