

Police chief says he can't fill open positions

Craig Shoup, Reporter Published 2:30 p.m. ET Oct. 16, 2017 | Updated 2:47 p.m. ET Oct. 16, 2017

Drug tests among challenges in hiring job candidates



(Photo: Craig Shoup/The News-Messenger)

FREMONT - The Fremont Police Department is overworked and understaffed due to challenges finding the right candidates to fill open positions, according to Chief Dean Bliss.

Like many Sandusky County businesses, the police department has been impacted by the opiate epidemic making job candidates unable to pass a drug test in order to be hired.

Bliss spoke to the Fremont Rotary Club Monday to provide an update on the city's police department.

Because of the lack of qualified candidates, Bliss said patrol and department jobs are going unfilled for the time being, meaning more overtime for officers on patrol.

"They are very busy," Bliss said. "Right now we have three patrol officers on day shift, and four on afternoon and midnight shift."

Bliss said that, ideally, he would have four officers working the first shift and five officers each on the afternoon and midnight shifts.

But the county's drug epidemic has prevented the department from increasing its ranks.

"It's hard to find qualified candidates, or people who meet our criteria," Bliss said. "We had a candidate that said he last did drugs a year ago, but that is too soon."

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Bliss said his staff is wearing down because of overtime shifts, and despite the department saving money by paying overtime instead of adding more full-time officers, his current patrol officers are working too many hours.

"Unfortunately we've had to just take calls rather than be proactive," Bliss said.

And the department's workload remains heavy, handling 1,960 cases so far this year, Bliss said.

"We've had 1,133 criminal cases and 827 traffic cases," he said.

When asked if the police budget would increase if more officers were added to the department, Bliss said the city has already budgeted for officers that have retired over the years or who left and their positions were not filled immediately.

Because of a decrease in patrol staffing, Bliss said Ohio Highway Patrol troopers have provided additional traffic enforcement in the city.

"If we have a domestic and a bar fight, all my officers are going to those calls," Bliss said. "I like having (the highway) patrol there, especially at night for traffic enforcement, and they are immediately there for us if we need backup. It's just good for officer safety."

Since Bliss became chief in April 2016, he said his primary goals have been to get more involved in the community and to make his department more active, including having officers meet activity quotas.

Bliss said he understands that quotas in police work can come with a stigma, but his officers' quotas include any interaction with the public, and a positive interaction carries the same weight as a negative interaction with the public.

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Fremont Police Chief Dean Bliss, speaking to Fremont Rotary members on Monday, said drug overdose deaths have been decreasing in 2017. (Photo: Craig Shoup/The News-Messenger)

"If an officer sees a group of kids playing football and they go out and play with them, that counts as a quota," Bliss said. "I want my patrol to average 1.5 interactions per shift, and that could be a midnight shift patrol going to check on doors of businesses to see if they are locked."

Bliss said the department will have a school resource officer starting at Fremont City Schools in January and will continue hosting events such as Coffee with Cops and Candy with the Cops to forge better relationships with the community.

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