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PLUMAS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Reason For Investigation

The Plumas County Sheriff's Office provides for public safety and emergency services to the citizens of Plumas County. The Sheriff's Office is experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining trained peace officers. The reason for this investigation is to provide insights and assistance to the Sheriff's Office regarding this issue.

Procedure

The majority of Sheriff's Deputies were interviewed as well as selected supervisory staff. The findings contained in this report reflect the opinions of those interviewed who expressed the reasons that they believe the County of Plumas has been unable to effectively recruit and attract new peace officers, as well as the loss of officers to other agencies.

Background

The Deputies of the Plumas County Sheriff's Office are competent, well trained and dedicated to serving the citizens of Plumas. The majority choose to work and raise their families in Plumas County in spite of opportunities for better pay, benefits, and working conditions elsewhere. This being said, conflict within the Sheriff's Office and perceived lack of support from the Board of Supervisors is forcing Deputies to seriously consider alternative employment.

1. The Board of Supervisors controls the majority of the funding of positions within the Sheriff's Office. This affects the number of positions available to provide for the safety of the public as well as the equipment and training available to Deputies in the field.
2. Inadequate staffing levels based on changes in population and unfilled positions cause Deputies to work alone, often with over an hour wait for emergency backup. There are times when there are only two Deputies on duty at opposite ends of the county as well as times when there is no law enforcement on duty at all in the entire county. Not only is the public not protected, the lives of Deputies are placed in jeopardy.
3. It is the responsibility of the elected officials of Plumas County, the Sheriff and the Board of Supervisors, to work together to assure that the citizens of Plumas County receive the best possible service from the Sheriff's Office.
4. The Board of Supervisors controls the hiring of support personnel even when those positions are fully funded within the Sheriff's Office budget.

This includes such critical public safety positions as Correctional Officer and Emergency Services Dispatcher.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding#1-Compensation and Benefits

Plumas County is often unable to attract trained candidates from law enforcement academies because the financial compensation and benefits that the Sheriff's Office is able to offer is non-competitive with other agencies.

- Trained Deputies have been lured to other agencies that can offer better financial compensation and benefits.

- Experienced peace officers from other agencies interested in transferring to Plumas County, in spite of lower pay, often decline to come to Plumas County once they learn that the peace officer retirement benefit is less than what is now becoming the standard for peace officers in California.

Recommendation#1-Compensation and Benefits

The Board of Supervisors and the Sheriff should work together to develop a long-term plan to make the financial compensation available to Deputies more competitive with other agencies. The retirement benefit should reflect what is becoming the standard for peace officers in California.

Finding#2-Equipment

The county does not fund the replacement of worn-out emergency vehicles as it does with the rest of the county departments. This has forced the Sheriff's Office to fund the replacement of emergency vehicles from grant funds that had been designated to upgrade radio communication.

- Radio communication for Deputies responding to emergencies ranges from fair to non-existent. This places the public as well as deputies at risk.

- Having unsafe or inadequate equipment and poor radio communications places both the public as well as Deputies at greater risk during routine

and emergency situations. It becomes less desirable to work under such conditions.

Recommendation#2-Equipment

The county should fund the replacement of worn-out emergency vehicles following the procedure it uses for other county departments.

- The Board of Supervisors should provide funding to upgrade the county communication system.

Finding#3-Training

The Sheriff's Office has excellent and effective in-house training. Specialized out-service training to allow Deputies to safely and effectively perform their duties is inhibited by the shortage of staff. This means Deputies cannot be sent to needed training, resulting in less service to the public. A small county with a limited number of Deputies needs to have effectively cross-trained officers. It is cost effective, positive for morale and provides better public safety.

Recommendations#3-Training

Implementation of recommendations for improved recruitment and retention as well as increasing the number of positions available would permit more out-service training, greater service to the public and increased officer safety.

- Many law enforcement agencies grant incentives to its officers who have specialized training or skills. The Board of Supervisors should provide funding to Deputies who attend training and retain certification in needed skills such as HazMat and others.

Finding#4-Supervision and Management

The general consensus of those interviewed is that the sergeants who provide supervision in the field are supportive, effective and provide good leadership. The only concern expressed was because of a shortage of field supervision, there are times when there are no supervisors on duty. This often requires Deputies to deal with situations or make decisions that are the responsibility of supervisors.

Recommendations#4-Supervision and Management

The Sheriff should review the number of field supervisors and scheduling so that there is always a supervisor on duty whenever Deputies are on duty.

Finding#5-Management

Upper management is seen as not providing leadership to the department. They are seen as not being involved, caring or supportive. There is a general fear of retaliation and the perception that some are favored more than others. Rarely does a member of management venture into the field to see what is going on, talk to their deputies, visit sub-stations or interact in any positive way. There is no interest in the ideas or opinions of field staff in improving the department. Most information comes to the field by the rumor mill rather than through direct communication from management. Deputies in the field expressed that management indifference to personnel is a major factor affecting retention of employees.

Recommendation#5-Management

Upper management needs to recognize its current perceived lack of leadership and to engage itself in a positive manner with its employees. The Sheriff can bring in facilitators trained in team building. Upper management should develop a plan and schedule regular visits to sub-stations, ride along on patrol on all shifts with Deputies, participate in training exercises with their staff and listen to their ideas and opinions to improve the department.

A formal process of effective and timely communication should be developed so that all employees of the department are kept fully updated on events, issues, changes and any other information needed to do their job and be informed. Departmental e-mail, notices and regular staff meetings should be implemented. This should include more informal mini-staff meetings at the sub-stations so that management and field staff can interact in a less formal environment.

Finding#6-Board of Supervisors

There is a 100% consensus of those interviewed that: (1) the Board of Supervisors does not support the Sheriff's Office; (2) members of the Board perpetuate interpersonal conflict with the Sheriff; (3) members of the Board purposely create road blocks that damage the morale and effective and safe operations of the

department. These are the major issues expressed affecting retention of employees.

An example cited is the requirement that the Board approve the filling of critical support personnel such as Correctional Officers and Emergency Services Dispatcher even when these positions are fully funded. Instead of approving filling these positions, the Board put off approval week after week jeopardizing the safety of the public as well as Deputies in the field and Correctional Officers in the jail.

Recommendations#6-Board of Supervisors

The Board of Supervisors and the Sheriff, for the safety of the pubic and the Deputies who serve them, need to be able to work together. A facilitator trained in conflict resolution should be brought in to work with the Board and the Sheriff to help resolve the inter-personal conflicts.

- Members of the Board should, on a regular basis, visit the stations, ride along and meet with the deputies in their Districts to better understand the needs, requirements and restrictions faced by all parties.

- Authorization should be passed to the Sheriff to hire any position within the Department that is funded.

Finding#7-Public Support

Deputies in the field believe that the public generally supports them. However, there are negatives perceived by the public relating to personnel issues within the Sheriff's Office and a lack of support from the Board of Supervisors. There has been little effort made by upper management in addressing issues regarding public support, and field staff is discouraged from interacting with civic groups and organizations. The Board of Supervisors rarely, if ever, has publicly spoken in support of the Sheriff's Office.

Recommendations#7-Public Support

The Sheriff should support, encourage and even require Deputies, supervisors and management staff to seek opportunities to speak and interact with civic groups, clubs, schools and other venues to inform the public about the Sheriff's Office and its mission.

- The Sheriff should develop a program for citizens of Plumas County to volunteer in support of the Sheriff's Office. A Citizens Auxiliary Unit could assist with things such as traffic and crowd control during community events, staff sub-station desks, assist with recruiting as well as other duties.

Conclusions

The majority of the Deputies in Plumas County believe that there is a lack of support from both the upper management of the Sheriff's Office and the Board of Supervisors. There is a shortage of staff, no emergency vehicle replacement program, poor radio communications system and little interaction with the community. This has created a negative work environment that severely detracts from the ability of the Sheriff's Office to serve the public and jeopardizes the safety of officers in the field. The potential for serious injury or loss of an officer due to lack of support places a tremendous liability both on the County of Plumas and its elected officials.

It is the responsibility of the Sheriff and the Board of Supervisors to work together to resolve these issues.