

A New Approach In Recruiting & Retaining Qualified Officers At The Bella Vista Police Department

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Abstract

The Bella Vista Police Department is and has been experiencing prominent manpower problems for several years. The growth of the community that we serve has skyrocketed in the past 10 years and the number of officers has not kept pace with this population increase. While talking to chiefs and administrators from other agencies, I, as a Lieutenant with the Bella Vista Police Department, have learned that this is a very common problem throughout Arkansas. The problem of manpower shortages affects small agencies as well as larger ones. Even though the city of Bella Vista approved new officers to be hired last year, I found that this did not solve all of our manpower issues; because we still had to find qualified applicants to hire. This paper will bring to light some of the problems that law enforcement is facing with manpower shortages and the difficulty in finding good applicants. It will explore old and new ideas for recruiting and retaining qualified officers and examine what the non-law enforcement community is doing to recruit new employees.

What seem to be the biggest problems facing law enforcement in Arkansas today? Is it high crime rates; no, is it drugs; no, is it domestic violence; no, the consensus, which definitely applies with the Bella Vista Police Department, is manpower shortages and trouble recruiting qualified applicants. Two years ago the city of Bella Vista passed a one cent sales tax to fund new police officers and firemen. Around March of last year we received hiring approval from the mayor and started to advertise for new officer positions and started accepting applications.

I thought this was the end to all of our department's manpower issues we had been experiencing for years, because we were finally getting those much needed new officers. Boy, was I wrong. After all the hard work that had been done trying to recruit applicants, only 49 applications were received. Letters were sent to every applicant inviting them to take a written and physical test. Of the 49 only 30 called back to RSVP for the test. Out of those 30 applicants only 22 showed up to take the test and 20 of those passed. We took those 20 people and interviewed 19 of them. After the interviews of the 19 people, we put 11 of them on a hiring eligibility list. I said all of that to say this; we are probably going to hire seven officers from that eligibility list before it expires in one year. The applicants toward the bottom of the list are fine applicants but they were the best of what we had to choose from. I would have liked to have tested three or four times that many people to be able to get the cream of the crop.

Table 1

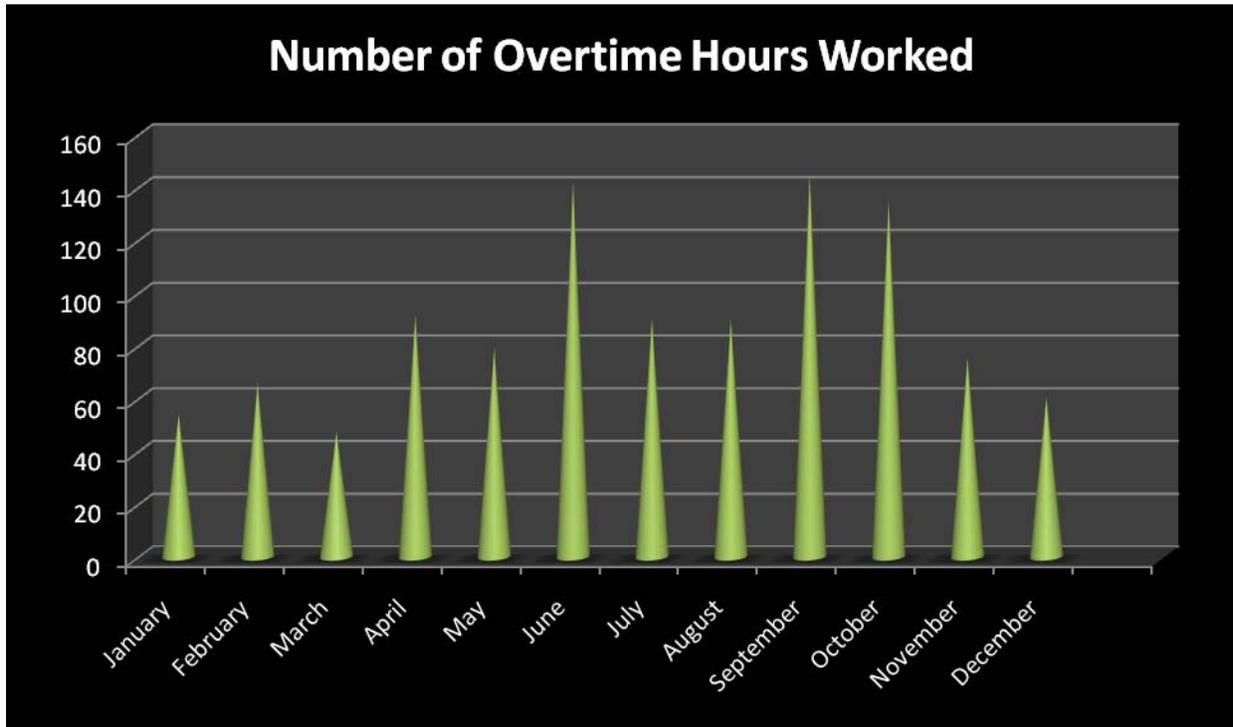


Table 1: Number of Mandatory overtime hours caused by manpower shortages for 2010 at the Bella Vista Police Department

Overtime Issues

As you can see from the graph above the Bella Vista Police Department had to spend a large amount of money on overtime in 2010. These overtime hours show how often the department was short handed in 2010. The months with the highest amount of overtime were June and September with almost 140 mandatory overtime hours each month that the patrol officers had to work just to keep the shifts covered. The lowest month, March, was still over 40 hours of overtime. Some of the manpower and overtime issues that the department had in 2010 will undoubtedly decrease with the hiring of three new officers, who will graduate the basic

training academy at the end of March 2011, but it will not solve all of the issues. The new officers will still have to go through an important eight week FTO program before they are placed on a shift and can start to contribute to the department. That is assuming they all make it through the academy and the FTO program. If one or more of the new officers does not make it through or if another one of the officers currently employed retires or quits, we are back to the same manpower problems that we have experienced in previous years. The department will then have to try and recruit more applicants and start the process all over again.

While trying to find a solution to my department's problem and doing some research for this paper I have found that other police departments and sheriff's offices have been innovating and changing the ways they are recruiting new officers. Recruitment in the corporate world has left us in the dust. While the nation enjoys a low overall unemployment rate, law enforcement agencies are finding themselves in competition with both public and private sector employers to attract the most capable officer candidates. Intensifying the problem is the fact that many agencies seem to be losing officers as fast as they can hire and train them. A federally funded study in 2007 by the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington advocacy group for police chiefs and commissioners, found that 10 percent of the nation's police departments had severe shortages of officers. As you can see from the chart below the Bella Vista Police Department was short handed almost every day of 2010. This led to several problems, such as low morale, low productivity and higher safety issues.

Table 2

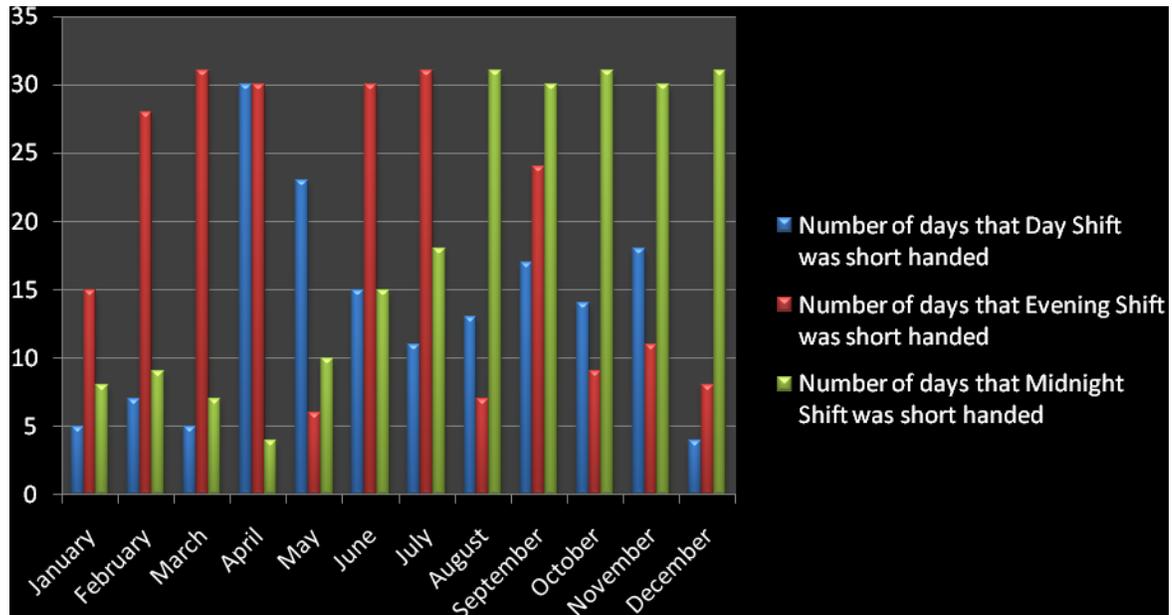


Table 2: Bella Vista Police Department 2010 manpower shortages by month & shift

Changes to department requirements

Departments all over the US seem to be having the same problem as we are here in Arkansas. In an article by Richard M. Ayres in the National Executive Institute Associates, Major Cities Chiefs Association and Major County Sheriff’s Association publication, he writes about how the New York City Police Department had to change their way of doing hiring. He states that the department waived the 2-year college requirement it had instituted in 1995 and lowered the applicant age from 22 to 21 years. Despite some opposition to waiving the college requirement, Patrick J. Lynch, president of the New York City’s Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, contended that the requirement still disqualified a huge number of people.

The Phoenix Arizona Police Department is looking to ease prior hiring standards to fill 1,000 positions over the next two to three years. In a news interview with police recruiter Lt. Lowelle Spalla, she told CBS 5 news, “Just because you were arrested for a misdemeanor crime or smoked marijuana in high school doesn’t exclude you from the process.” In a separate interview with CBS 5 news the Chief of Police with the Gilbert Arizona Police Department said, “The key is we want to hire human beings, if we didn’t hire people who made mistakes, we wouldn’t be here.” Both the Phoenix and Gilbert Police Departments said they will consider the merits of candidates on a case-by-case basis.

In recent years the St. Petersburg and Tampa Florida Police Departments dropped the need for a two-year college degree if the candidate has military or law enforcement experience. The Oakland California Police Department is no longer disqualifying applicants for minor, long-ago drug convictions or gang involvement. The Boston Police Department changed its age limit for recruits from 32 to 40.

In an article in USA Today, H. Darr Beiser, reported that police agencies find it hard to require degrees and stated that the Plano Texas Police Department took a bold step in its police recruiting efforts. At a time when departments across the nation are desperate for new officers, Plano began requiring its recruits to have four-year college degrees. The move was aimed at making the city’s 345 member police force more like the residents of Plano, a city of about 260,000. Plano is one of the wealthiest communities and is home to the headquarters of JC Penney, Frito Lay and Electric Data Systems. Plano officials cited studies indicating that officers with college degrees have fewer discipline problems than those without.

In the same year Plano struggled to find enough recruits. The city eased its hiring requirements and began accepting those with two years of college or three years in the military. The latest requirements are stiffer than those from the previous year, when recruits were required to have at least the equivalent of a high school education. The episode fueled an ongoing debate over whether a police department's desire to raise recruiting standards can be realized at a time when there are thousands of openings for cops nationwide.

In an analysis of disciplinary cases against Florida cops from 1997 to 2002, the International Association of Chiefs of Police found that officers with only high school educations were the subjects of 75% of all disciplinary actions. Officers with four-year degrees accounted for 11% of such actions.

Since 1963, when the Multnomah County, Oregon Sheriff's Department became one of the first police agencies in the US to impose a four-year degree requirement on recruits, only a few other local departments have followed. Less than 5% of local police departments with more than 100 officers require four-year degrees, says Louis Mayo, executive director of the Police Association for College Education. Most departments give higher pay to recruits with four-year degrees, he says, but have avoided requiring recruits to have them for several reasons. One reason is concerns about recruiting enough minority officers in increasingly diverse urban areas. Another concern is fears that not enough college graduates would be attracted by police salaries.

New recruiting strategies

In an article from hutchnews.com it reported that the Hutchinson Police Department in Kansas changed the way their agency had been recruiting. Their previous recruiting process was not producing very many applicants at all. The article states that prior to starting their new

recruiting system they would only have four or five people show up to take their test if they were lucky and the first time after the new system was initiated they had 15 people show up to take the test. There were several things that the Hutchinson Police Department did to change the way they were recruiting new applicants. First they put a posting on www.careerbuilder.com and that immediately resulted in a recruitment pool nearly three times larger. Second they started doing what Topeka Police Department was doing by advertising open positions

In an article entitled “Cop Crisis Officer Shortage Has Oakland’s Police Department Looking for More than just a Few Good Men”, recruiter John Lois discussed the new things he is doing to recruit new applicants. Lois stated in the article that he will no longer setting up his booth at the local job fair, because “it’s just not worth our time”. “Unlike the Oakland Police Department,” John states “high-tech companies have money to spare”. At any given job fair, recruiters pass out everything from stuffed animals to CD holders, but even more appealing than the free stuff is the cash that the companies can offer to new recruits and the Oakland Police Department can’t offer that to new recruits.

Lois stated in the article that Oakland PD still uses some of the traditional recruiting techniques, but has started to employ new ones. Lois flew to Louisiana and Texas for potential recruits. He visited four Louisiana colleges and five larger colleges in Texas, including Texas A&M. Lois said that the department wanted to target large schools that had criminal justice programs. He also posted ads on the internet, reaching a much larger audience, instead of putting ads in the newspaper and he has spiffed up his fliers and pamphlets.

Recruiting Women Applicants

The [National Center for Women and Policing](#) reports from a recent survey that nearly 90 percent of all law enforcement agencies require a physical agility test for job applicants. Women face challenges when hiring practices include physical benchmarks based on male aptitude, a practice that has seen some changes in recent years. The survey reveals that departments that do not use the test have 45 percent more women on the force than those with the agility exams. Though critics see this practice as a lowering of standards, advocates point out that the original standards are simply based on a certain percentile of male physical ability. Of course, the question of physical strength remains and has led to a reluctance to hire women into policing. A number of studies document that both police officers and community members are concerned that women are not strong enough or aggressive enough for police work. However physical strength has not been shown to predict either general policing effectiveness or the ability to successfully handle dangerous situations.

Those police agencies that adopt progressive recruiting strategies that target woman have proved effective. The Albuquerque, NM Police, the Tucson, AZ Police, the Delaware State Police and the San Jose, CA Police are agencies that have doubled, tripled or quadrupled the percentage of woman on the force using targeted recruitment. When women are aggressively pursued through police department recruitment efforts, more will apply, more will be selected to attend the academy and complete their basic training and more women will work productively as sworn officers.

Most agencies create recruitment posters and brochures that recruitment personnel bring to career fairs and colleges to hand out to interested potential applicants. It is imperative that these brochures contain images of female officers, detectives and supervisors working

alongside their male peers. A general rule of thumb is that all web pages, brochures and posters with images of police officers should contain women in a third of the pictures

Some people today still believe that women do not belong in law enforcement, but women have proven themselves to be just as competent as their male counterparts. This is best summarized by the quote from the National Center for Women and Policing article entitled, “Recruiting and Retaining Women: a Self-Assessment Guide to Law Enforcement.” Given the many difficult challenges facing modern police agencies, the advantages for hiring women have never been more clear.

Recruiting minority officers

Recent employment numbers reported by police agencies in many major cities are quite disheartening. Reports show that the ratio of officers belonging to minority groups is at an all time low with respect to the community populace. Most police departments in the US are sensitive to the growing need to recruit more minority officers. The police force in any city or community is there to protect and serve every member of that community, not just the racial majority

Many departments say that a lack of minority applicants is the main reason for the shortage of minority officers. A black or Asian child growing up in a community where the majority of law enforcement is white is going to begin associating law enforcement with white people. It takes an extreme amount of courage for a minority child to make the decision to go into law enforcement. The long and short of it is that all communities in the United States are made up of various ethnicities and sub-cultures and therefore, police forces should reflect all of those cultures so that the communities can be better served.

With competition fierce for qualified applicants, agencies across the board are making tremendous efforts to expand their candidate pools by recruiting nontraditional officers. According to Monique Bond, the director of news affairs for the Chicago Police Department, their agency is waging an aggressive campaign to widen its applicant pool. The Chicago Police Department has 13,000 sworn officers and is aiming to increase both the number of officers as well as the diversity of the force. Bond said that they are working with faith-based institutions in the minority community to get the word out that they are recruiting.

The department also updated its print marketing materials to feature minority officers. Bond said that they have changed the images to lure minorities into a “new” police department. The campaign has been effective, doubling the number of overall applicants and increasing minority applicants by 16 percent. The department has also expanded its testing dates from once annually to four times a year and the applicants can now take the test online at various locations around the city.

Lt. Alfred Lewers Jr., the coordinator of the recruiting, background investigations and training unit for the Fort Lauderdale Police Department, says that his unit’s mission is to develop positive change. “Were not just about recruiting officers,” he said. He wants to promote the image of police in communities where it hasn’t always been positive. Part of that goal is to bring more minority officers on to the 514 officer department. The Department has made great strides in increasing diversity, Lewers says. We’re looking at people who wouldn’t normally consider a police officer career. Lewers said that between 2001 and 2006 they added 5 times the number of black officers that they previously had.

Fort Lauderdale Police Department is also advertising in non-traditional print venues such as “Essence” and women’s health and fitness magazines to appeal to female applicants. They have been also reaching out to people at traditionally black colleges.

In conclusion, I see that the Bella Vista Police Department is lagging behind most other departments in recruiting and it is essential that a change be made if we want to continue to compete. Although facing challenges, there are several ways I see that this can be accomplished. The next time the Bella Vista Police Department conducts its entry exam I would love to see 75 or more applicants take the test.

The Bella Vista Police Department needs to get its web site up and running as soon as possible, partner with the Northwest Arkansas Community College, University of Arkansas and John Brown University to try to get involved with their law enforcement programs and recruit their students. The department also needs to come up with some type of incentive program for our current officers who recruit good applicants and other certified officers to our department. Most challenging of all, we will have to do this with an almost zero budget for recruiting.

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