



PHOTO BY COLIN FLANDERS

Essex Police Chief Rick Garey looks over staffing data last week. Garey says his department is in a staffing shortage that's impacting proactive policing efforts and jeopardizing a push for better recruitment.

A 'critical' low

By COLIN FLANDERS

Essex's police chief says years of trying to do more with less has spun the department into a "critical" staffing shortage that undermines proactive policing efforts and impacts employee morale.

Chief Rick Garey said EPD hasn't added officers in over a dozen years, and the department has tried to assuage this dearth by "work[ing] smarter." But higher training demands and an increasing population has pushed the department to a breaking point.

"We've tightened our belts as much as we can," he said.

That's why he asked for two new officers in the budget Essex voters will judge next week. But according to Garey, those additions represent only a small portion of what's needed.

EPD has 27 full-time positions, including one vacant slot and three officers now in the academy. Based on a reported population of about 21,300, that puts the department's officers per capita at 1.27. Similarly-sized Vermont towns, meanwhile, show

Faced with a growing demand and overworked staff, police chief says EPD needs 18 more officers to match towns of similar scale

an average ratio of about 2, including Burlington (2.2), Rutland (2.1), South Burlington (2.1) and Colchester (1.5), according to 2016 data provided to the FBI.

"We're 18 officers under what we should be for the community size and police department size," Garey said. "But at this point, we'll take whatever we can get."

He said the department's minimum staffing — two patrol officers and a supervisor — has become the norm most of the day forcing officers to bounce from call to call. That leaves little time for mandatory incident reports and even less time for proactive efforts.

One of those officers is Nick Van Winkle. He said he's only seen the department fully staffed for one six-month period over his eight years on the force.

"You're working more than 40 hours a week," he said. "Some weeks, I work 60. There's other weeks I've worked more than that. A lot of times, officers are working double shifts, so they're working 15, 16 hours a day."

For officers like Van Winkle, the

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shortage is most apparent not in the major incidents but the calls that often fly under the radar: a barking dog complaint or a minor car crash. Each brings its own round of paperwork, and "all of a sudden they're adding up, and you're running, because you've got a bunch of stuff you're trying to accomplish," Van Winkle said.

The department has used technology to hone the department's resources over the last decade or so. For example, speed camera units that are a common sight around Essex send data back to the station that can be searched for trends. Officers then make targeted patrols and enforce speeds during peak hours.

But gadgets can't drive through neighborhoods and business areas at night to check for broken windows or open doors. Nor can they respond to a bank alarm or any other incident that requires a physical presence.

"There's some stuff that just takes manpower," Garey said.

Some departments, including those regionally, have lessened their officers' workload by cutting services and only accepting online reports for certain crimes. EPD has resisted that shift because officers value one-on-one interaction with community members, but Garey said he's now considering whether to shed some non-essential services.

The shortage is impacting more than that, however. Speeding complaints are on the rise because officers don't have time to patrol for the rule breakers, Garey said. He pointed to three automobile deaths last summer in which speed was a contributing factor.

Addressing some of the more concerning violations, like passing stopped school buses, becomes a challenge when the department can't afford to assign an officer solely to the task, Garey said. And at a trustees meeting last December, police also reported an uptick in drivers running red lights;

residents continue to say speeding is rampant in the village.

Resource allocation is not Essex's problem alone. Departments around the country are considering ways to do more with less, a puzzle that's been intensified by the growing scarcity of qualified applicants.

Some blame media coverage of police-involved incidents, while others point to the increasing demands of the profession and a growing job market that offers more career choices.

In response to shallow applicant pools, Chittenden County agencies, including EPD, hosted the first-ever joint recruiting day last year, where applicants could take the entrance and fitness exams, speak with agency reps and even interview on-site.

Though collaborative on its face, the event underscored the competitive nature of recruitment. With so many departments feeling the effects, applicants can be choosy. That doesn't bode well for departments that ask officers to go beyond regular duties.

The now-chief says he's a prime example. As a captain, Garey oversaw the town's information technology while also recruiting new officers in a balancing act where the latter suffered. He's now committed to ramping up hiring efforts — and he'll need to, given the strong possibility that up to five longtime employees could retire in 2019 alone.

"When we have a candidate come in ... and they hear from officers, 'It's nuts. I can't keep up with my work.' That's the type of stuff that deters them," Garey said.

Retention becomes a challenge, too, when officers can move to a different community and make the same pay for half of the workload, Garey said.

The department is also finding it more difficult to fill shifts when people take time off. Garey has come closer this year than ever before to ordering people in on their days off, and EPD has recently hired more part-time officers than he's seen in his three decades here.

Night shifts are a tough

sell for someone with a day job, however, and gaps in the schedule inevitably mean overtime.

For Garey, the challenge lies in the budget: To maintain a level of service the community has come to expect, he needs more officers. But more officers mean more taxes, and Garey said previous chiefs have been told several times new full-time employees "probably would not fly with the voters" at that time.

This year's request nearly met the same fate: After a three-hour cut session on the final night of budget workshops, the selectboard debated whether to keep in the department's two new positions. The hypothetical officers had to compete with three full-time positions in other town departments.

Garey sent backup in the form of a lengthy memo urging members to keep his request intact, arguing that maintaining the status quo could have "significant impacts on the quality and quantity" of policing. It seemed to do the trick: The board compromised on starting one of the two officers halfway through the fiscal year, with some members referencing Garey's pleadings when explaining their decision.

It was a small victory in what Garey expects to be a long-term campaign. He still wants to add at least one officer to each shift and remains firm on his target ratio. But he notes the improbability of convincing the selectboard and taxpayers to green light such a bold increase — at least in a timeframe that precedes his own retirement.

He's now researching some grants that defer salaries over a three-year period to help lessen the blow. And he continues to look for shortcuts, asking employees to share any ideas on how to do the job more efficiently.

What's clear to Garey, however, is he can no longer ask his cops to work harder.

"Every one of our officers gives us 110 percent," he said. "Where we're running into problems is we're not asking for 150 and 160."

"It's getting to the point where things are starting to break."