

Candidates vie for sheriff's position

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Sheriff Shane Nelson is running for re-election, challenged by Bend Police Officer Scott Schailer.

The November 3 election comes as the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office has fully configured its complement of Sisters-based deputies and placed Lt. Chad Davis in command at the Sisters substation under its revised contract with the City of Sisters (*see related story, page 1*).

"We're looking forward to the foot beat and the bike patrol in the City of Sisters," Nelson told *The Nugget*.

Allocating resources and enforcement efforts in Sisters will be a collaborative effort with City government. Strategic planning will set priorities for law enforcement in Sisters and the west-county area.

"We listen to their voices (city officials and citizens) and also pay attention to the calls for service we have in that area," Nelson said.

Nelson was appointed to his position from within the DCSO by Deschutes County Commissioners in 2015 and was elected to the position — serving one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation — in 2016.

He is also leading the sheriff's office at a time when law enforcement is under an unprecedented level of scrutiny around issues of race and how it interacts with people in distress due to mental health issues. Nelson says he is obviously aware of that scrutiny, but he does not feel that local law enforcement is under pressure.

"I don't feel any pressure there," he said. "I feel

support to try different options."

He noted that, "Deputy sheriff's are problem solvers" and that "not every occasion requires a uniformed person."

He is supportive of efforts to integrate deputies' response into a broader set of mental health services, including a mobile crisis unit with mental health professionals and the use of the new county stabilization center, which recently went to 24-hour operations. He noted that there is a behavioral health specialist on the job in the jail.

"In some cases, it's better (to have) medical or behavioral health response, better (to) hand off to more extended services."

He noted that people with mental health and behavioral issues can have a disproportionate level of engagement with law enforcement until other services are accessed. He noted that recently one individual had 200 calls for service. Deputy Evan Kennedy worked to get the person linked up with services that could address the underlying problems.

Nelson said DCSO and other local agencies have been developing "solutions outside the criminal justice

system for several years."

Law enforcement professionals themselves face challenges to their well-being — physical, mental and emotional. Earlier this month, DCSO rolled out a "Health of the Force Initiative (*see related story, page XX*).

"The law enforcement profession is stressful on our deputy sheriffs, and their families," Nelson said in a release announcing the initiative. "I work with great teammates. We want to do all we can to improve and take care of them and their families in order to ensure successful careers in providing excellent public safety and customer service. This enhanced Health of the Force program will provide additional tools and resources for deputies to care for their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being."

The initiative includes enriching of the existing peer support program, and enhancement of the current partnership with the Central Oregon Public Safety Chaplaincy. The Health of the Force Initiative institutes a voucher system for "no questions asked" behavioral health counseling; provides for a sleep study to measure the effects of shift work; and provides means of enhancing

physical fitness/wellness.

Accountability of law enforcement is at the forefront of many citizens' concerns. Nelson told *The Nugget* that DCSO is testing body cams in combination with in-car cameras and will, at some point, require them agency-wide.

"It will be Sheriff's Office wide," Nelson said. "And the Sisters deputies will be included in that."

Nelson's opponent has stated that, if elected he will institute a position of Undersheriff for DCSO (*see story, page 5*). Nelson said that he will not change his current command structure, which he says is "working effectively."

"I have three captains who are second in command," he said. "They are all autonomous with their division. For me, right now, an Undersheriff position is not needed."

Sheriff Nelson told *The Nugget* that he continues to be committed to forging "strong relationships with the community (we) work for." Priorities going forward include "keeping the illegal marijuana market at bay" and, in Sisters, making sure that quality of life is maintained even in the face of growth.



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"Livability is our job," he said.

Nelson noted that homelessness is a pressing issue countywide, including in Sisters, and an area the sheriff's office must continue to work on, in partnership with other agencies, nonprofits and providers. Getting more treatment beds to treat addiction is critical to addressing the issue, which he feels needs to be worked on "in more depth."

Despite the pressures of the times, Nelson said that he is buoyed by the spirit of the people coming in to serve in the sheriff's office, as evidenced by members of a recent recruiting class with whom he talked.

"They are all positive about law enforcement," he said. "That was great input from our new team members."

The new recruits meet what Nelson considers a calling.

"I believe in selfless public service," he said.

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