

STRETCHED TOO THIN

Chief Kerns says he'll bring police staffing proposals to the City Council in January

Public calls for service from the police have increased 36 percent in the past three years in Eugene, but staffing levels at the Eugene Police Department have not risen to match the growing needs of the community, EPD Police Chief Pete Kerns says.

The chief wants money for more police officers and options such as Community Court, while critics say money would be better spent addressing the problems of homelessness.

With an average of 64 additional calls for service each day, Kerns says, wait times are increasing, and police have limited time for regular patrol duties that keep the community safer.

"There's a finite capacity to do work," Kerns says. "We only have 50 officers that work in a 24-hour period, so if we have more work coming in they have to proactively do less work."

Oregon has the lowest number of police officers per capita compared to every other U.S. state, Kerns says, "and Eugene is a little bit below the state average."

Kerns says he is limited to a certain staffing level by EPD's \$53 million budget. "If the community wants more police service we need more police officers." He says he will bring a few proposals to the Eugene City Council in January, but did not disclose their exact content. "The council could choose to ask for a levy. We're going to be providing them with some options."

The limited staffing translates into slower service for Eugene, the chief says. The highest priority calls (including emergencies), priority 1 and 2 calls, have seen an increase of nearly a minute in wait time before police arrive since 2014.

Kerns says that can mean an entire extra minute of waiting on the phone with 911 while someone is pounding on your door trying to get in. "Sometimes people will wait a day or two days for us to respond to a burglary," he says.

As previously reported by *Eugene Weekly* ("Springfield Police Levy," 11/2), EPD's response time for these high priority calls is significantly longer than the Springfield Police Department's, with Eugene residents waiting 10 to 14 minutes and Springfield residents waiting less than five minutes for the same kinds of calls. Springfield successfully re-upped its jail levy in November, and the Lane County Jail's levy was passed twice by voters.

Eugene has seen an increase in crime over the past three years, EPD data show. The majority of calls for service are centered on downtown and the Whiteaker neighborhood, with another hotspot of property crime in the West University neighborhood.

Kerns says this may be due to increased rates of homelessness in Eugene, along with poor drug enforcement and a lack of mental health resources.

But programs like Community Outreach Response Team (CORT) and Community Court have helped reduce recidi-



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— EPD POLICE CHIEF PETE KERNS

vism rates with frequent flyers — the top 40 repeat offenders who were not deterred by arrest.

Sgt. Julie Smith is in charge of the downtown team. She says her team often does patrol-type activity, but during certain shifts, "We primarily respond to calls to service, and there weren't enough of us to get to all the calls that were on the screen."

"I started looking at the fact that there is a core number of individuals that are repeat offending, recidivism, and causing a big portion of the problems," Smith says. "So just arresting them 200 times a year was not changing their behaviors."

Smith helped start CORT in 2016 — a program that works with these top arrestees and helps them meet their needs through community resources such as drug and alco-

hol counseling, health services, mental health services and housing instead of jail time. In the trial run of CORT, "Ninety-five percent of those individuals in that six-month period did not reoffend," Smith says.

Smith adds that her downtown team is now integrating this humanist approach in all their contacts.

"We're experiencing big-town problems," Smith says. "I am hoping that the community looks at the bigger picture and looks at the holistic approach that we're trying to take."

Lauren Regan, executive director of Civil Liberties Defense Center, says taxpayer money is better spent somewhere other than policing in order to address homelessness. "Rather than spending more money on law enforcement, that same amount of money should be spent putting it toward social services, whether that be housing or mental health services," Regan says.

Regan points out how underfunded Lane County Mental Services already is, and she says taxpayers should fund human services instead of policing. "Until we address the failure to provide basic mental health assistance, housing, etc., then all the cops in the world are not going to fix the homelessness problem in Eugene."

One proposal Kerns plans to discuss with the City Council in January may include an expansion of the CORT team and Community Court.

"We have a social problem here in Eugene with homelessness and the mental health problems and the addiction," Kerns says. "It's going to require an approach that acknowledges that those folks are going to continue to offend no matter how many times we put them in jail and no matter how long they stay in jail if we don't also provide treatment for them."

City Councillor Emily Semple says, "I do think we need more police. We are short-staffed, officers are over-worked and areas of town aren't getting the police response they should. Downtown is still a critical situation." She adds that CORT and Community Court "are great and are making a difference downtown. More funding for those programs would be fantastic and the outcomes would be significant."

The focus for EPD funding requests seems to be on solutions to recidivism and homelessness. Possible proposals include extending CORT to cover more hours — CORT currently only operates for 10 hours a week. Additionally, Kerns says, "What we'll probably ask the council to do is give us more Community Court time."

Kerns says an increase in staffing alone won't be enough to lower crime rates in Eugene — it will take a more sustained effort to help treat those who frequently reoffend.

"We can both make the place safer and improve the lives of people living in the street," Kerns says, "and it would be a pretty amazing accomplishment if we could do both those things at once." ■

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