Small-town struggle for quality police chiefs

Some small N.H. towns struggling to find, keep quality police chiefs

Hiring top candidates can be difficult with larger municipalities offering more

By LEAH WILLINGHAM

Monitor staff

Small towns are having trouble finding – and keeping – quality police chiefs.

At least three New Hampshire police chiefs in towns with less than 5,000 people were either put on administrative leave or let go in September.

In Webster, the chief accused selectmen of micromanaging him, while the town leaders fumed because their new hire never took his required physical fitness test or moved to town, as promised. The dispute boiled over into a lawsuit in Merrimack County Superior Court.

In Bristol and Newbury, select boards quietly sent their police chiefs packing, but kept those conversations behind closed doors, citing personnel issues.

Although town governments try to keep police and politics as separate as possible, it can never be truly so when police chiefs are hired by and report to select boards, said Executive Director of the N.H. Chiefs of Police Pat Sullivan.

“There’s always a political game that has to be played,” Sullivan said.

Finding and keeping the right police chief can be difficult too as small towns struggle to compete with larger towns and cities with more money and resources.

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SAMUEL BRICKLEY,

Holderness select board

The town of Salisbury successfully voted to disband
More than three-quarters of New Hampshire’s 234 towns and cities have populations under 5,000 people.

Who’s the boss

Webster resident Tara Gunnigle said the people in town have lost confidence in the select board to manage the police department.

“They just don’t hire the right people,” Gunnigle said.

In Webster, chief Benedict Liberatore, a former Connecticut state trooper who started the job about a year ago, is now suing the select board after he says the board tried to force him to resign by placing him on leave without pay and preventing him from taking a state-required fitness test.

In July, Liberatore read a statement at a public meeting saying that the select board had been “micromanaging, scrutinizing, singling out and trying to run the police department” since his first day working in Webster.

By September, Liberatore was put on administrative leave. The town did not initially disclose whether Liberatore was being paid.

In court, a lawyer for the town said the select board gave Liberatore plenty of time to complete the training, and that he failed to follow other town policies, including not following a workhours policy that instructs the town’s police chiefs to schedule only one on-duty officer at a time in order to maximize coverage.

Other Disputes

In 2016, Cantebury Police Chief John LaRoche was first placed on unpaid administrative leave before resigning amid allegations that he assaulted a 16-year-old female in the Boscawen police explorer program when he was an officer there.

After calls were made by residents for a comprehensive review of the police force, an their police department seven years ago after accusations of micromanaging led the town’s two-person police department to resign.

Ken Ross Raymond, chair of the Salisbury select board, said it seemed like the best choice for the town.

“The average select person doesn’t know anything about policing,” Raymond said. “What business do we have supervising or authorizing that department?”

A need

Finding officers who want to work in small towns is no easy task, said Samuel Brickley, professor of criminal justice at Plymouth State University and a select board member in Holderness.

Brickley said many officers are attracted to the pay and benefits of larger departments in larger cities. “You can make a lot more money if you go downstate to Concord or Nashua than you can in any of those small towns,” he said. In 2016, a Concord’s police chief made around $120,000 a year. Webster’s police chief was making around $70,000.

Brickley said that in Holderness, they’ve been lucky enough to have had the same police chief since the 1990s.

“We have a great police chief who we trust and we don’t feel the need to micromanage him,” Brickley said. “Our job is just to hire the best people we can and let them do their job – not to do it for them.”

Brickley said a lot of getting a good chief comes down to how much a town wants to spend on law enforcement. Holderness’ chief is making $76,794 this year.

In order to acquire a seasoned officer with a cheaper pricetag, some towns, like Webster, have sought out retired officers for the role of chief.

This practice, commonly referred to as “double dipping” can be controversial.
investigation by the Merrimack County Sheriff’s Office found an overall lack of leadership and training within the department.

In 2014 in Weare, a slightly bigger town of around 9,000, former chief John Velleca was placed on administrative leave after a domestic violence order was issued against him.

These conflicts have led some towns to consider cutting their police departments entirely. Canterbury and Webster have voted at past town meetings on whether to disband their departments, but neither effort was successful.

Some say it’s unfair for a government official to take on another government job after retiring and receiving benefits. There have been several bills in the New Hampshire legislature to limit or eliminate the practice.

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