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Desert Hot Springs police chief has vision for filling positions

Cuts are expected to thin the ranks of Desert Hot Springs Police Department



With his department facing salary cuts, a hiring cap and the likely departure of 10 of 25 officers in the next few months, Police Chief Daniel Bressler said he will be launching an 'aggressive recruitment campaign' to quickly fill the ranks. / Richard Lui/The Desert Sun

DESERT HOT SPRINGS — With his department facing salary cuts, a hiring cap and the likely departure of 10 of 25 officers in the next few months, Police Chief Daniel Bressler said he will be launching an “aggressive recruitment campaign” to quickly fill the ranks.

For volunteers, Bressler said he will make background check requirements “a little less stringent.”

“They won’t have to commit to wearing the uniform or driving the car,” he said. “There are people that have approached us and said, ‘What can we do to help?’ and we want those people to help.”

Bressler assumed the role of police chief after former Chief Kate Singer announced her early retirement in December, less than a month after the City Council declared a fiscal emergency.

City leaders hoped the legal maneuver would give them more legroom as they attempted to negotiate salary cuts with the city’s various unions, including the Desert Hot Springs Police Officer’s Association.

In December, following Singer’s retirement, the council approved a more than 20 percent cut to employee and police pay, and other reductions, such as eliminating the uniform allowance and reducing incentive pay.

On Tuesday, city officials said they will likely end the fiscal year with a more than \$200,000 cash balance because of the various cuts and salary and benefit concessions.

early 70 percent of the city’s more than \$17 million in expenditures goes to public safety. Before the council approved the cuts, police department leadership, which included two commanders and a chief, averaged more than \$250,000 in annual salary.

Bressler now serves as the department’s sole commanding officer.

“The cuts are effective, but the first paychecks haven’t been issued,” Bressler said, adding “the morale relating to pay is extremely low” for the 25 officers that remain on the force, some of whom have applied to other agencies.

“I anticipate losing two to three officers in the next month and up to 10 officers in the next few months,” he said.

However, “we already have several officers in the hiring process. I believe I can fill every single vacancy whenever they happen.”

Rookies, reserves and officers who have been out of the field for awhile are among the candidates Bressler believes might come to Desert Hot Springs looking for a job.

“The city manager has authorized me to hire up to 28 officers,” he said. “There are officers out there who are looking for their first law enforcement job. There are officers out there that for whatever reason got out of police work and now want to come back, and those reasons are as varied as the officers out there.”

Bressler said the department is “staffed up” on the patrol side, but needs more personnel on the administrative side.

The department has about a dozen active citizens on patrol, mostly retirees, who serve from two to 15 hours a month.

“What we are going to create is a second tier of volunteers who are going to be more sets of eyeballs for the community,” he explained. “They may not be at the citizens on patrol level ... but we know there are people that want to help and we want to give them a role in the city.”

Bressler said there are a lot of people who can help in support programs, such as talks at schools and watching city parks.

Wendell Phillips, an attorney representing the city’s police union, said the department will lose many of its best officers.

“You don’t get a professional law enforcement team without offering competitive pay,” Phillips said. “You won’t want the kinds of officers their lower pay will attract ... The other departments are going to get the better candidates, and Desert Hot Springs is going to get what’s left.”

Phillips, who plans on seeking a court injunction next week to halt the salary cuts, said the police union “didn’t make any concessions, and we don’t think that was lawful.”

Under state law, the city is required to implement a fact-finding process before reaching an impasse and cutting salaries or positions, Phillips said, adding that “a declaration of a fiscal emergency does not negate the responsibility of the city to go through this process.”