Sun 5-31-15

Shortage of deputies in L.A. County

As Sheriff McDonnell tries to turn around agency, understaffing threatens his agenda. Money isn't the issue.

BY CINDY CHANG

As Los Angeles County Sheriff Jim McDonnell tries to turn around a department under federal scrutiny for jail brutality, racial harassment and corruption, one of his most immediate challenges is a staffing shortage that could threaten his reform agenda.

By July, the number of sworn employees needed to fill the gap will be about 1,300, according to sheriff's officials, including hundreds of deputies to make the county jails safer in response to an inmate abuse scandal and a rash of jail suicides. The deputies' union puts the number even higher.

McDonnell is expanding an understaffed recruiting department and launching a hiring push. But he must avoid the mistakes of previous large-scale recruitment drives under his predecessor, Lee Baca, when the department added new deputies with histories of misconduct.

The problem is not money: Most of the positions are funded. Rather, it is not easy to find qualified candidates. For every 100 applicants, only two or three end up wearing the badge. McDonnell has vowed not to lower standards to get more bodies in the door.

To make up for the shortage, deputies are sometimes working back-to-back eight-hour shifts, leaving them exhausted and raising safety concerns.

"We would rather work short than hire the wrong people," said Todd Rogers, the assistant sheriff in charge of personnel and recruiting. "We are not going to compromise our standards just to meet a hiring goal."

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Next year's county budget, which takes effect in

[See Deputies, A18]

MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

L.A. COUNTY Sheriff's Deputy Guillermo Garcia gets in the face of a recruit on his first day of training.

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Because of budget problems, hiring was frozen for several years beginning around 2010, and the department has struggled to catch up.

One long-standing recruiting barrier has been a requirement that all new deputies spend their first few years working in the jails, even if they are mainly interested in a patrol career. A "dual track" system, with separate career paths for custody and street patrol, has been implemented, but for now, new deputies still start in the jails because of staffing needs.

The shortage facing the L.A. County Sheriff's Department stands in contrast to the relatively full rosters at other large law enforcement agencies.

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The Orange County Sheriff's Department also is close to full staffing, said Lt. Matthew Stiverson.

In Los Angeles County, the Sheriff's Department is starting a new recruitment drive and has already increased the number of applicants to about 360 a week from 250. The number of academy classes is also increasing from six a year to eight.

At a Dodgers game Thursday night, McDonnell and LAPD Chief Charlie Beck threw the ceremonial first pitch after announcing a recruiting partnership with the team. Sheriff's deputies and LAPD officers — among them a SWAT team member, an explosives detector and a helicopter pilot — are featured on baseball cards along with Dodgers players. Sheriff's officials will be holding Twitter chats and reaching out through Facebook and the Dodgers Radio Network.

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A quarter fail an initial screening, another quarter fail the written test and 1 in 3 fail the physical fitness test. Failure rates for the background check and medical exam exceed 50% for each.

Then comes the six-month training academy. Twenty percent of those who start on the first day end up washing out.

The L.A. County Sheriff's Department is not unique in this respect. In Orange County, 3% to 5% of applicants end up joining the 2,000-person department.

On a recent morning in Norwalk, Nicolette Barfield hoped to beat the odds and become an L.A. County deputy sheriff. She had made it through push-ups, sit-ups, an agility sprint and an arm strength test. Up next: a 1.5-mile run.

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Run on the street, not a treadmill — and include hills in your workout.

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"I want to be that mentor as well as the person who helps them understand why they made a mistake," she said.

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PUTTING THE PAST BEHIND

Under Prop. 47, thousands of L.A. County residents are seeking to shed the stigma of being labeled a felon

By Marisa Gerber

Susan Burton knows what the first day out of jail can feel like.

So after she got sober in the late '90s, she started spending time at a spot downtown where buses dumped women just released from custody. If they had no place to go, she invited them to come stay on a bunk bed in her bungalow in South L.A. Her hospitality grew into a reentry program with five homes that helps women reunite with their children after their release.

But her career path kept hitting the same roadblock: her own felony drug record.

Five years ago, she drove to a prison in Chino to speak to women in the cosmetology school there about how to get plugged into a community after their release. But when she arrived, she learned she'd been denied access. She felt crushed. Then mad.

"It's crazy," she said, her voice dropping to a hiss of a whisper. "What do I do to redeem myself? What else could I possibly do?"

An answer came in November, when voters passed Proposition 47, an initiative that reduced drug possession and several other nonviolent felonies to misdemeanors. The ballot measure — one of the biggest criminal justice changes in decades — has prompted the release of more than 3,700 inmates from state prison.

Opponents of the measure said it would make California's streets more dangerous by releasing criminals and would strip away much of the incentive that got people into drug treatment — keeping a felony off their record. But another part of the law that drew less attention allows people who have already served their time to ask a court to reduce years-old convictions from felonies to misdemeanors.

Thousands of people, like Burton, have taken advantage. Since the measure passed, judges in Los Angeles County have received more than 6,660 applications to reduce old felonies to misdemeanors. Los Angeles County estimates that as many as 300,000 applications could be filed in cases stretching back decades. (A spokeswoman for the court said officials are not tracking the outcomes of the applications.)

Alhambra Police Chief Mark Yokoyama, president of the California Peace Officers' Assn., which lobbied against the measure, said he's not opposed to people with an old felony or two getting reductions if they've turned their lives around.

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[See Prop. 47, B7]

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE

MEL MELCON Los Angeles Times

SUSAN BURTON, right, hugs Georgia Horton, a resident of Burton's reentry program for women recently released from incarceration. After years of drug addiction, Burton became sober and began working to help women like her, but her record kept holding her back.

[Prop. 47, from B1]
said, but he thinks only a small sliver of the population with felony records falls into that category.

Christine Ward, executive director of Crime Victims Action Alliance, another opponent of the law, said reducing old felonies undermines accountability for offenders.

"In our state right now," she said, "we're really minimizing criminal behavior."

But others say the law helps people who are now law-abiding eliminate the barriers of a felony record.

For Burton, being labeled a felon affected how she did her job. For others, it held them back from getting work or housing. Some say it prevented them from getting custody of their grandchildren. And many agreed the stigma of a "felon" label felt stifling.

While people won't have their rights to use or own a gun restored, reduced crimes will otherwise be treated as misdemeanors. That means people could run for office or serve on a jury. Those with eligible felonies have until November 2017 to ask a court for a reduction.

From a back office in the Compton courthouse, Deputy Public Defender Carole Telfer runs a one-stop shop for people looking to reduce their felonies under the ballot measure. Light pink memo notes — all scribbled with phone numbers and nearly identical "Call re: Prop 47" messages — explode from a green shoe box on her desk. Nearby, there's a brown accordion folder filled with prisoners' handwritten letters.

A man who had a felony drug possession case reduced wrote to Telfer in April before he was released from custody.

"I will call you and say thank you once I'm released," he said. "For the first time in a long time, you made me feel like I matter, so again, thank you."

Even people who aren't eligible for early release under Prop. 47 are grateful, Telfer said, calling it one of the most rewarding assignments in her 35-year career as a public defender.

After the measure passed, Telfer began with the cases of people still behind bars on charges eligible for reduction. But it was often people with decades-old convictions, like Burton, who were most anxious to get through the process. They often call to tell her how eager they are to put the felonies — crimes committed by someone who no longer felt like them — behind.

"It's amazing the ripple effect this has had," Telfer said. "So many people went to prison for so long on drug possession cases."

That was the case for Burton, who fell into a cocaine addiction after her 5-year-old son was run over in 1982. Grief felt so foreign. She had never lost anybody before and didn't know how to talk about her son or whether anyone would listen if she could figure out how. Cocaine numbed the pain, but it also triggered a pattern of incarceration that followed her for nearly 20 years.

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After one release, a guard wished her a calloused farewell: "I'll see you back in a little while."

Eventually, she checked into drug treatment in Santa Monica and started seeing a therapist every week. She got sober and vowed to dedicate her life to helping other women break the cycle of incarceration. But even as she gathered accolades — she was dubbed a "hero" by CNN in 2010 — she felt held back by her felonies.

"Being able to reduce the felony to the misdemeanor," she said, "it really takes this burden off you that you carry all the time."

Gerardo Reyes, a longtime meth addict who recently got sober and had three drug felonies reduced, said the new measure lifted a veil of anxiety that had shrouded his life.

As a dishwasher studying to become an electrician, Reyes said the new law has given him a burst of energy. He no longer lies anxiously in bed every morning, trying to push away imaginary scenarios in which no matter how hard he worked or studied, an employer would skip over him for an electrician job because of his felony record.

"It's like I was born again," he said. "Right now, the way I feel is like ...'Here, go start.' "

For others, the chance to reduce some of their felonies feels like a way to shed the skin of a former self.

That's the case for Renee Wyatt, whose heroin addiction began at 13 in her home, where she remembers finding syringes her mom had used to inject the drug in the bathroom.

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Family Services recently denied her application to get custody of her granddaughter, who is in foster care, because of one of her felony theft convictions. She also knows that the state's Board of Behavioral Sciences will consider her criminal record when deciding whether to license her as a social worker.

She met with an attorney a few months ago and knows several of her drug possession charges are eligible for a reduction.

On a recent afternoon, she propped her feet up on the coffee table in her living room above a copy of "Psychology Today" magazine, and daydreamed about her future. Her eyes widened and she ran into her room, returning with a black "vision board" she'd decorated three years earlier with things she hoped to accomplish.

In colorful letters, it read "MSW," short for master's in social work. She also cut and pasted phrases from magazines — one reads "Dream, plan, go," another "Leap of faith." A picture of a building labeled "Wyatt Transition House for Women," represents her long-term goal of opening a reentry home.

As her eyes panned to the right, they froze on a picture of an ocean seascape labeled "Caribbean."

She let out a high-pitched scream and her eyes welled with tears. She had forgotten about the board when she and a classmate recently reserved a hotel in Jamaica as part of a graduation trip.

"It comes true," she said, singing the last word.

She closed her eyes and prayed out loud: "Thank you, Lord. That's amazing. What a life."

marisa.gerber
@latimes.com

COURTS Sat 5-30-15

Tanaka, Carey trial could be delayed four months

Daily Breeze

By City News Service

The federal corruption trial of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's former second-in-command and an ex-captain could be delayed until October, a judge said Friday.

Former Undersheriff Paul Tanaka and ex-sheriff's captain Tom Carey are scheduled for trial in July on obstruction of justice charges.

However, defense attorneys told U.S. District Judge Percy Anderson they need at least until October to prepare.

The judge ordered attorneys for both sides to meet and agree on a new proposed date. If they have not come up with one by June 5, Anderson said, he would schedule one himself.

Anderson said he hoped to have the case — which could take a minimum of two weeks — tried by the end of the year.

Evidence that will be given to the defense includes an electronic Web-searchable database and 4,000 pages of transcripts from a previous related trial, Assistant U.S. Attorney Margaret Carter told the court.

Tanaka and Carey, both 56, left the downtown courthouse without comment.

The charges against the men brings to 22 the number of current or former sheriff's officials charged in an ongoing federal probe into corruption and civil rights violations by guards at two downtown jail facilities.

Tanaka

Tanaka — who is on a leave of absence as mayor of Gardena — and Carey, who oversaw an internal sheriff's criminal investigations unit, have denied charges contained in a five-count indictment returned May 13 by a federal grand jury.

Tanaka and Carey are accused of orchestrating a scheme to thwart a federal probe into deputy misconduct at county jails.

Both are charged with conspiracy to obstruct justice, and each is named in one count of obstruction of justice.