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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Whether the job is to teach, cut meat or enforce the law, very few people retire at the same job they started.

Being a police officer is no different according to police chiefs in Southwest Kansas.

Those that start as on-the-beat police officers usually do not remain that way for long. They either advance into another position, or they find a new career.

Many of them find that new career or promotion in another community.

That has been the case in Liberal and Dodge City, and it is not a new development.

Some in Liberal have stated that the police department is short 20 officers, but that is not the

case.

“We are authorized for 42, but we cut that back to 40 because of budget constraints,” Liberal Chief Al Sill said. “ We have never been full. We usually operate around 30 to 35. Thirty-five is a pretty comfortable number as far as having officers trained and experienced. Right now we are running at 28.”

That means that level is down about seven officers from its normal operating level.

It’s not the first time Liberal has been short a few officers.

“We’ve been at this level before, and we will get numbers back up,” Sill said. “Officers will move on, some will stay. This has happened before. Many other administrations were down officers, and it will probably happen a again.”

Keeping a full force is not unique to Liberal.

Dodge City Chief Craig Mellecker also works to keep his staff filled.

Dodge City is slightly larger than Liberal, and they try to keep a force of 49 officers.

“We currently have six positions open,” Mellecker said.

Both Liberal and Dodge City usually have to go outside the community to fill their staffs.

“We don’t get a lot of home-grown officers,” Mellecker said. “We don’t get a lot of folks born and

raised here to apply and work for the police. Most are from out of the area. You run the risk of bringing the people in, and after a few years they want to go back to where their family is, or where there is water and trees. It is difficult to recruit people in southwest Kansas.”

Liberal has studied the issue, according to Sill, to make sure that the pay rate was in line with other comparable communities, and has extended the residential requirement.

“Officers used to have to live in Seward,” Sill said. “We missed out on smaller communities surrounding Liberal. We increased the radius to 32 miles. That way we hit some smaller communities. They may want to be a police officer but can’t move. We’ve done that in hopes of attaining more local applicants.”

The size of the departments in Liberal and Dodge can also be restrictive for officers.

“It is always hard to keep people that want to go to bigger departments, metro areas,” Mellecker said. “They see it as more action, and more latitude within a bigger organization to go into narcotics, detective bureaus, or promote up through the ranks. The size of ours, promotions don’t come along that often because of how big the department is. We’ve fought that over the years.”

While being short a few officers is nothing new, Sill said he is committed to reach the optimum number. He said two officers are currently in training and two more applicants should be starting their training soon.

Those four would bring Liberal’s total to 32, only three away from the normal operating number.

While they are being brought up to speed, Sill said that street duty always comes first.

“We always operate that the street takes priority,” he said. “We have people assigned throughout the department. If we get to the point where we need to, we shift personnel to the

streets. There is always adequate coverage every shift, day and night. We've never suffered on the streets, nor will we. Over time we will gather enough applicants and get back to up strength."

Sill added that communication within the department allows his resource to be placed where they are most needed.

"We have regular meetings with regard to current crime trends, and we stay on top of that," he said. "We shift resources and focus on what is necessary at the time."

Both Mellecker and Sill worked their way through the ranks and have seen similar staffing challenges through the years. Mellecker has served in Dodge City for 28 years and has been chief for the past two years.

Sill served as chief since late 2007.

And while staffing has always been an issue, both have learned how to adequately provide law enforcement in communities that see many new faces year after year.

"I think most people understand that staffing in Southwest Kansas in any organization is always a concern," Sill said. "I don't think we have any organization fully staffed all the time. We understand that and make sure we work together to help everybody have the resources they need."

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