

Virginia state police, deputies, cite dire straits in call for raises

The Virginia State Police are experiencing a manpower shortage as many officers leave to take higher paying jobs in law enforcement.



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Law enforcement salary issues are coming to a head for state leaders, even as budget writers look for the cuts to fill a revenue hole.

The head of the Virginia State Police has told legislators that troopers are leaving the force in big numbers for better paying jobs, including jobs at local departments with higher starting salaries. Col. Steven Flaherty has called pay issues at VSP "a stark reality being experienced across every section of the department."

He has 257 vacancies on a sworn force of 2,148.

The Virginia Sheriff's Association says some starting deputy salaries are back below thresholds for food stamp qualifications, just two years after a budgetary push to address this exact issue. The problem isn't statewide, but in counties that don't supplement base deputy pay levels set out by the state.

House Appropriations Chairman S. Chris Jones made it clear last week that addressing trooper pay was a top priority heading into the January legislative session, despite the need to trim more than \$1.5 billion out of the two-year budget the **General Assembly** approved last year.

What that solution will look like remains to be seen. Whether this attitude will roll over to deputy salaries, or to other state-supported salary line items, remains to be seen.

State Sen. Bill Carrico, a former trooper, has pitched a potential solution for state police. He filed legislation last year, and re-upped it for 2017, to raise annual vehicle registration fees by \$1.25, with the new money earmarked for state police. Carrico, R-Galax, would raise the fee another \$1.25 every year for 10 years, addressing not only immediate pay concerns but pay compression issues and long-term concerns about staffing shortages on the force.

This would raise \$10.3 million next year, growing to \$68.7 million a year in 2022. Carrico said this would address cuts that have snowballed at the department since 2006.

Carrico's measure passed the Senate in 2015, but died in Jones' House Appropriations Committee. The senator said he hasn't heard from his House colleagues this year about the bill's chances. Jones, R-Suffolk, said this month that it's "too early to tell" if the measure will have more support in the 2017 session.

"But (Carrico) and I certainly share the same goal," Jones said.

Flaherty sent state patrol employees a letter in September, laying out concerns with staffing levels and encouraging troopers to contact legislators. The letter quickly became public.

In the first nine months of this year, 103 sworn VSP employees left the department, as did 121 civilian employees, Flaherty wrote. Fifty-five new troopers are set to graduate "basic session," the patrol's academy for rookies, in March. But Flaherty has said the funding issues are so severe that the department may have to delay its next basic session.

Most of the officers who left the patrol did so to seek better pay, Flaherty wrote. A trooper's starting salary is \$36,207 a year. York County has a court security deputy's job posted now that that pays \$38,939 a year. Norfolk is advertising for police recruits at \$40,000 a year, with a raise that kicks in after they complete the academy after three months on the job.

A VSP study last year, which compared actual trooper levels to the number needed to provide 24-hour

coverage and handle existing calls for service, determined that the Tidewater area needed another 139 troopers. The biggest difference was in Norfolk and Virginia Beach, where the VSP's 35 troopers would need to double to hit this recommendation.

For Hampton and Newport News, which have 24 troopers assigned, the recommended force was 42.

John Jones, who heads the Virginia Sheriff's Association, said he hopes concerns shown by the House Appropriations chairman for VSP translates to support for deputy salary increases, too. These salaries are largely funded by the state, though local jurisdictions often supplement them.

In counties that don't, the starting salary is \$31,009 a year, John Jones said. That's just under the threshold for a family of four to qualify for **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** through the federal government, assuming the deputy doesn't have a second job, and his or her spouse doesn't work. It's unclear how many counties don't supplement this base salary. Jones said he is gathering that information.

The state addressed this issue in 2014, upping starting deputy salaries. But the food stamp cut-offs have changed, and plans to fund a 3 percent raise for all state-funded employees this year fell by the wayside when state revenues came in lower than expected.

Without that expected increase, base deputy pay fell back below the threshold.

These are far from the only budget pressures as Gov. **Terry McAuliffe** and General Assembly budget writers look to re-balance the state budget when the legislature convenes in January. A number of Virginia leaders hope to increase mental health funding this session, continuing work done the last two years to begin reshaping a system whose holes have sparked widespread concern.

The State Board of Education re-ran its funding formula earlier this year and determined that the state should put nearly \$600 million a year more into public K-12 schools than it does. Legislators have looked askance at that figure, and even advocates don't expect actual funding to approach that total.

Medicaid also will be more expensive than the state planned, with the McAuliffe administration saying earlier this month that the health insurance program for poor and disabled Virginians needs an extra \$281 million over the two-year budget.

The figures may seem dire, but the state budget runs some \$50 billion a year, and Virginia has more than 100,000 employees. Budget deficits haven't been uncommon in recent years, nor have they always been as hard to overcome as they initially seemed.

To close a gap in 2014, McAuliffe rolled out plans for as many as 565 layoffs. Nearly all those layoffs turned into reassignments instead as state employees moved into open jobs.

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