

www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-policepresence-po,0,902791.story

chicagotribune.com

Pontiac struggles with depleted police force

Associated Press

1:29 PM CDT, May 21, 2008

PONTIAC, Mich.

Officer Scott McDonald had seven places to be at once as he started a recent night shift with the city police department.

Even with emergency road patrol help from the Michigan State Police and the Oakland County Sheriff Department added this year, the loss of more than half its officers over the past few years means Pontiac's short-staffed police department sometimes struggles to keep up with the volume of crime-related calls.

On a recent Friday night, 20 calls that the day shift couldn't get to were waiting for the next crew, including seven calls on the city's southeast side patrolled by McDonald and a partner in a separate car. Such holdovers are so routine that officers didn't even consider this a busy night.

A home where a breaking and entering report had been called in shortly after 6 p.m. was visited about 8:30 p.m., early in McDonald's 12-hour shift. McDonald, a 36-year-old who has been with the Pontiac department about 11 years, used a flashlight to survey the damage to a front door that had been kicked in. The owner told him some money had been stolen.

After investigating a call about trespassing and possible drug dealing that turned out to be a dispute among neighbors, McDonald drove to a house where a domestic argument had been reported more than four hours earlier. The situation had been peacefully resolved before police arrived.

"We called three or four hours ago," a resident said matter-of-factly as police pulled up.

After the call, McDonald reflected on the community's general reaction to the swamped police staff.

"They feel for us ... and themselves," McDonald said. "They've been pretty understanding with the response times being up. Well, for the most part. Obviously some people aren't going to be happy with the response time being what it is."

McDonald is one of seven officers on duty this night, down from an average of at least 12 just a few years ago. Pontiac had 170 police officers in 2004. Now it has 65. The detective ranks have been trimmed from 21 to four. The department drug unit was virtually disbanded, although it does have representation on a countywide team.

Several Michigan cities have lost 10 percent or more of their police officer positions since 2001. The state's sluggish



economy has taken a toll on the tax revenues that state and local governments use to pay for police protection.

But few places have been hammered as hard as Pontiac, a suburban Detroit city of roughly 66,000 reeling from automotive and other industrial layoffs. The city's seasonally unadjusted unemployment rate for March was 17.4 percent, more than double the state average.

Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm has appointed a five-member panel to investigate Pontiac's finances, citing the failure of local officials to agree on how to handle a budget crisis.

The situation is complicated in Pontiac because voters early this year voted to keep the city from making cuts in the fire department but turned down a millage request that would have beefed up police. That leaves the city with fewer options when it comes to cutting personnel.

Pontiac Police Chief Valard Gross says a city police officer will get to an urgent crime scene in 6 minutes or less, but response time to calls for other incidents such as minor property theft might take longer.

Some types of crime, including larcenies and break-ins, have risen in Pontiac the past few years.

"You'd have to be blind not to see it," said Velma Stephens, a long-time Pontiac resident who helps lead a neighborhood association where the crime rate is a hot topic.

Gross attributes rising crime primarily to the economy. And it stretches his thin department even thinner.

"My guys and ladies are working their tails off," Gross said. "We're still getting 70,000 calls a year. They don't just go away."

Before the state police and Oakland County Sheriff's department began providing emergency backup and monitoring heavy traffic areas earlier this year, there were times when Pontiac police would have had to call in help from nearby cities if they had received another call needing immediate attention.

Police say having more traffic stops could prevent some future crimes. Routine stops sometimes lead to the arrest of felons wanted for parole violations and weapons or drug offenses.

The outside help also frees up city police to work in neighborhoods. With county and state police pitching in, the departments are making about twice as many arrests as before the help arrived.

"We have developed a really good working relationship," Gross said.

But sometimes help is slow in coming, particularly on shifts where city police are mostly on their own.

After 9:30 p.m. on that recent Friday, McDonald was driving behind a Cadillac with no taillights. The driver quickly sped up after spotting the patrol car in his rearview mirror, raising McDonald's suspicions. The driver pulled over into a gas station parking lot soon after McDonald flashed the red-and-blue lights atop his patrol car.

The driver, it turns out, was wanted for a felony parole violation and back child support payments. He first gave McDonald a fake name after getting pulled over.

McDonald checked twice to see if backup was available, but all the other officers in the area already were busy. He got the suspect into his patrol car and searched his Cadillac with a flashlight on his own.

He also was alone as the suspect's crying, upset family members and friends -- alerted by the suspect by a cell phone

call as he was being pulled over -- pulled up into the gas station parking lot in two separate vehicles, more than enough people to interfere with the lone officer if they'd wanted to cause trouble.

"The crime rate's up. And the (number of) officers are down. I don't know if the two are connected, but it definitely causes some problems for us," McDonald said. "As it's getting warmer, it's getting busier -- and we just don't have enough people."

Copyright 2008 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.