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Eugene police aspire to be a 21st century partner

By Matthew Denis

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Editor's note: An earlier version of this story contained incorrect numbers of misconduct complaints from the 2017 audit of the Eugene Police Department.

When Mark Gissiner took over as the Civilian Police Auditor nine years ago, he was struck by the lasting impression prior police misconduct has left on many citizens.

“I was surprised by the intellectual width of the disdain for police,” Gissiner said. “People remember stuff here.”

Still, Gissiner said, the police have to understand where this comes from.

“Officers have more power than anybody in this country. They can kill people, put them in handcuffs and take them to jail. You have to realize you have that kind of power,” he said.

With this in mind, the city of Eugene and the police department are finding ways to improve the department’s admitted problem points, which include a department that is unable to respond to one in three non-emergency calls and a 20-minute increase in average wait time for a response to these calls.

Despite a transparent roll out of new initiatives over the past 10 years and a commitment to proactive, community-oriented policing, there remains complex challenges that require a commitment from the whole community, including police, City Council, neighborhood association and the diverse population of Eugene.

Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner has introduced a one-year plan that strategically aligns with the pillars of President Obama’s May 2015 21st Century Policing report. Part of Skinner’s aim is to build trust and legitimacy in the community, establish a clear plan for policy and oversight as well as enable technology and social media to improve enforcement practices.

The City Council is supporting the plan by devoting funds to improving public safety. The council committed to funding critical policing measures, such as recruiting, with \$8.6 million in a one-time, 18-month funding strategy councilors likely will pass as part of the supplemental budget in December. City councilors also kicked off discussions that would buoy the public safety budget by up to \$22.8 million. Some of this money would fund additional recruiting classes scheduled to begin Jan. 7 and April 7.

This commitment to the Eugene Police Department by the City Council is, in part, support for a long-range philosophical change in policing tactics.

“The culture used to be focused on arresting bad guys. It began shifting to a more caring department under (former Police Chief) Kerns,” Gissiner said.

Kerns oversaw the evolution of Crisis Intervention Training for police officers in 2008, then made it mandatory in 2015 after the high-profile police shooting of veteran Brian Babb and the NAACP’s accusation that police beat a mother while protecting her 19-year-old son in mental crisis.

Kerns also oversaw the establishment of oversight programs such as Office of the Independent Police Auditor and the Civilian Review Board, established by voter-approved city charter amendments in 2005 and 2008, to monitor police behavior after high-profile scandals rocked the department.

The Eugene Auditor and Civilian Review Board allow people to lodge complaints and praise for police independent of the department’s oversight. According to its 2017 audit of the police department, the auditor found that overall complaints lodged by community members dropped from 374 in 2016 to 325 in 2017, and allegations of misconduct decreased from 29 in 2016 to 26 in 2017. .

In alignment with 21st century policing, the department also sought to keep up with technological advancements in law enforcement. Eugene matched a quarter million dollar federal grant in 2013 to introduce body cameras to the department. And in 2017, Eugene police committed to transparency with the deployment of these cameras on all sworn police officers.

Skinner, in his just-over six months in office, has made numerous visits to get to know Eugene neighborhoods to hear about the issues endemic and important to residents. Most recently the department held an informal discussion with the chief Tuesday at The New Day Bakery in the Whiteaker neighborhood.

Even before Skinner arrived, the police department was showing a willingness to institute progressive improvements. Lt. Ron Tinseth, in charge of recruiting since 2015, evaluates candidates first on their character and potential to provide high-quality service to the city. And Lt. Angie San Miguel, who oversees the department's vision for training, evaluates recruits not just on how well they might police but also on their emotional intelligence.

"We look at people's ability to do the job — are they the right person for this work?," said San Miguel. "The right person has to be able to multitask and have a special personality. You have to have a passion for people, to help and have to understand that it's a difficult job."

This challenge includes assessing how much force to apply during tense moments. Eugene's last gun-related incident on June 30, for example, involved Sgt. Michael Ware and Officer Joshua West. Officers shot and wounded a suspect after a Taser was unsuccessful in disarming the individual. Both officers were placed on administrative leave, which is standard procedure in officer-involved shootings, and the district attorney found the shooting lawful.

Sgt. Bill Solesbee recreates this experience to help train recruits.

"We focus on less static, more interactive, scenario-based training. If you have an event, it will likely become part of training," Solesbee said.

Solesbee, who has been in law enforcement for 28 years and with Eugene's police department for 24, took over the police training division in March. He likes what he sees so far with Skinner.

"Skinner has a clear vision and is making decisions that support that vision," Solesbee said. "To have someone who relates well with the police and with the community at the same time is very rare. And it makes you want to be a better person."

Sarah Pishioneri and Mel Hite, organizers with Ward 9, the homeless neighbor's association, see a difference in the way police interact with the homeless, but disagree that this positivity reflects a change in enforcement.

“There’s been more positive interaction with the police. More joking, smiling, etc., but police interaction with the unhoused is very different than that with the housed,” Pishioneri said.

“There’s still harassment and interference (from police). Standing there with arms crossed, staring them down is a way to get people to move in an intimidating way,” Hite said.

One approach cited by organizers is called “The Wolf Pack.” Four officers approach a homeless person from different directions. There might be good intentions, Hite said, but the approach is threatening.

This is in contrast to how new police officers such as Officer David Potter view themselves.

“I like the community policing aspect. I’m not a person who just takes someone to jail,” Potter said. “This is an opportunity to help, to go out there and talk with people to help them solve problems.”

Even with this approach, some citizens feel that the enhanced community role of police does not address the underlying circumstances homeless people are facing.

“It seems like the police are nicer, but this is not what people need,” Pishioneri said. “These are economic refugees. No matter what face you put on it, even if it is a smile, it’s still harassment of people because they don’t have a home.”

Pishioneri’s point emphasizes what the police see as their ultimate road to success. Skinner’s 21st century vision for the department streamlines operations and updates technology, but relies on the rest of Eugene as partners.

“It takes a holistic partnership to make things work: police, parks, city council and citizens,” Solesbee said.

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