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D.C. Patrol Staffing Falls Short Some Areas Get Just One Officer

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D.C. police routinely staff neighborhood patrols below their own minimum standards, with some areas having just one officer or none at all, according to a review of police records and interviews with city officials.

Of the department's 3,625 officers, only one in six were on community patrols in either of two recent 24-hour periods for which The Washington Post examined roll call sheets. That is the same ratio as in 1997, when a landmark consultant's study found that the department failed to deploy its workforce effectively.

The busy 7th District, in the southeastern corner of the city, averaged fewer than the citywide minimum of two officers in each of its 11 patrol areas, with several having just one officer the evening of April 19. On that Saturday shift, a homicide, a carjacking and two incidents of assault with a deadly weapon occurred.

"It's outrageous," said D.C. Council member Kevin P. Chavous (D-Ward 7), who has attended police roll calls to witness the staffing for himself. "On a regular basis, we may have as little as one or two officers actually show up."

D.C. Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey blamed the staff shortage on competing demands related to homeland security and chronic problems with officers on extended sick leave and limited duty.

"The point is, we've got a lot of responsibilities on this department, and all these are not just answering 911 calls," Ramsey said. "It's not people sitting behind desks."

The Post's analysis of roll call sheets covering April 15-16 and April 18-19 indicates that the problem is magnified by the department's long-standing inability to keep those assigned to the patrol areas on the job. If such problems continue, they would greatly lessen the impact of the 175 additional officers that Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and the D.C. Council want to hire next year. The council will vote on the proposal this week.

Police records show that many officers assigned to patrol are not actually doing so. Hundreds of officers are not available at any given time because of extended sick leave, military responsibilities or diversion to other tasks. Even those signed up to patrol are frequently given other duties, including conducting surveys or inspecting large trucks to guard against terrorist attacks.

A department report last month showed that 2,009 officers were assigned to the patrol areas. Of that number, 252 were lieutenants and sergeants. Of the 1,757 patrol officers, 86 were on limited duty, 90 were on extended sick leave, 163 were detailed elsewhere and 86 were unavailable for other reasons. The total number available for full duty: 1,332.

A Chronic Problem

Lt. Diane Groomes, who works out of downtown's 3rd District, said the patrol areas are chronically understaffed and police are constantly busy writing reports, responding to burglar alarms and sometimes simply answering phones at station houses.

"It keeps eating at your manpower," Groomes said.

Police lieutenants said they're also hampered by the large number of officers on extended leave. Some said that officers can be on leave for years yet still be counted on their rolls as assigned to a particular neighborhood.

"We've got a lot of people assigned on paper," said Lt. Michelle Williams of the 7th District, who does double duty running two patrol areas. "If you're stressed out for two, three or four years, this may not be the job for you."

System Predates Ramsey

The system of 83 police service areas, a mismatched quilt of communities averaging just under one square mile, was created by police officials in part to combat the shortage of beat patrols detailed in 1997 by the consulting firm Booz-Allen & Hamilton. The system predates Ramsey, who embraced and implemented it. Only recently has Ramsey begun to push for an overhaul that would cut the number of patrol areas by half.

The PSAs are the backbone of the community policing approach so highly touted by Ramsey and the mayor.

But the strategy calls for more than responding to 911 calls: Officers are supposed to have time to leave their cars, walk beats and prevent crime through their visibility and knowledge of the neighborhoods they serve.

Ramsey said that the shortage of beat officers appears worse than it is because there are too many patrol areas.

Ramsey, who has battled complaints about patrols for years, has ordered that many officers in specialized units spend a week on patrol every couple of months. He also has set up a daily meeting with top commanders to decide where to assign canine and mounted units and officers attacking drugs or prostitution, based on crime data. When no officers are assigned to a PSA, the department tries to have some officers cover two service areas, Ramsey said, although he acknowledged that this wasn't how the system was designed: "I mean, ideally, it shouldn't happen."

No national standard exists for how many patrol officers a city needs. And many researchers contend that a department's ability to solve crimes through detective work is at least as important to controlling crime as beat patrols.

But D.C.'s political leaders and community activists say that police response times are slow and visibility remains low, despite Ramsey's decision several months ago to require that patrol cars keep their flashing lights on at all times.

A Political Effort

Ramsey and the mayor invested substantial political capital in their push for 175 more officers, which would bring overall staffing to 3,800 officers by October 2004. They overpowered the resistance of D.C. Council member Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3), who as head of the Judiciary Committee chastised them for failing to hit the target despite council funding for that level for several years straight.

Patterson requested the roll call sheets from the department and provided them to The Post after the newspaper's Freedom of Information Act request was denied by the police department. She said she believes the reports should routinely be made public.

"The numbers show we're not using officers effectively," Patterson said.

Her complaints are echoed by a number of other council members, though the council has agreed to the request for more officers. Chavous and others are seeking to require that 60 percent of all officers be assigned to community patrols.

According to the roll call records, police service areas in upper Northwest's 2nd District seemed to be the best staffed in the city during the daytime hours of Wednesday, April 16. In upper Georgetown and Glover Park, where the patrol service areas are generally larger in size, there were five officers. Ramsey said this deployment fits the crime patterns in the area, with most crime happening during the day.

But during that same period, only one officer was in Northeast Washington's Trinidad neighborhood, which has struggled for years with assaults and other crimes.

Early April 19, three of the 14 police service areas in Northwest Washington's 4th District had no officers.

"My residents have all but lost patience with the chief on this issue," said council member Adrian M. Fenty (D-Ward 4), who represents the area.

As of early yesterday, there were 86 homicides this year, which is about 23 percent more than at the same time last year. The number of killings in the city has gone up steadily since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a grim trend that experts have blamed on the economy, the resurgence of the volatile drug PCP and the diversion of D.C. officers to new homeland security duties.

Making Up for Long Shifts

During the week for which roll call sheets were obtained, Ramsey said, many officers had been given extra time off because they had worked a stretch of longer shifts during mass demonstrations and a heightened terror alert.

But others say that has become the reality of policing in Washington and that Ramsey must find ways to keep the city covered.

"It's been a real problem since 9/11," said Anne Theisen of Columbia Heights. "I see much less of the police."

Kathy Chamberlain, a community activist from the 6th District in Northeast Washington, said residents are upset about the level of police staffing and welcome the move to hire more officers.

However, she said, "People think that is a spit in the bucket compared to what we need."

Complaints about thin police patrols have dogged Ramsey for nearly his entire five-year tenure as chief. Remapping PSAs will add to his flexibility in deploying officers. Shrinking the number of patrol areas will make it easier to prevent some of them from going entirely unstaffed.

But that alone won't put any more officers on the street. And it could distance residents from their local police commanders, each of whom would be responsible for a larger area, experts said.

"This will maybe reduce embarrassments," said Brian Forst, a professor of criminal justice at American University.

"But I'm not sure that it's consistent with the notions of community policing."

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