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Small departments feel pinch of training requirement in police reform

By Larry Parnass, The Berkshire Eagle
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DALTON — Like employers everywhere, when Dalton Police Chief Deanna Strout picks a job candidate, she is eager for that handshake of welcome.

But, hiring by the department, already tricky because it must take candidates from a Civil Service list, got harder this year. A month before Strout was sworn in this past winter, police reform legislation vaporized the program used to train reserve officers — those who work less than full time and whose ranks number in the thousands. Amid the transition of leaders at the Dalton Police Department, that change escaped notice.

“We certainly didn’t know. We signed this gentleman up for the reserve academy, only to find out that it was shut down,” Strout said of her candidate.



Dalton Police Chief Deanna Strout says that while she supports new training requirements for officers, recent reform legislation has all but imposed a hiring freeze on her department.

EAGLE FILE PHOTO

With its usual training pipeline blocked, Dalton opted this spring to add two full-time officers by elevating existing reserve staff. Now, instead of going to the reserve academy at Springfield Technical Community College, Strout's hoped-for new hire

will have to undergo more rigorous training over 23 weeks, as required by the new law. Current reserve officers, meantime, will be compelled to undergo additional training that will take about 200 hours to complete.

That higher bar will compel cities and towns across the state to pay more to train officers.

And once all officers have the higher level of training, what's to stop those who work part time in small towns from applying for full-time positions anywhere? That's a question being asked by leaders of small departments that have used a cadre of part-time officers.

"Filling the ranks is going to be difficult," said Chief Timothy Sorrell, of Lanesborough.

Why, he asks, would a candidate for a part-time police officer position, after working to attain the full training credential, be satisfied with a part-time post?

"And come back to a job that would only offer them part-time employment?" Sorrell asked. Not many would settle for that, he thinks.

Police Chief Craig W. DeSantis, of Lee, thinks the new law will, over several years, lead smaller departments to discontinue use of part-time officers.

"I see no long-term staffing model that maintains reserves," DeSantis said. "That will have a significant impact on many communities, Lee included."



Craig W. DeSantis, Lee's police chief, says his department, over time, probably will have to phase out the use of part-time "reserve" officers because of new training requirements under the new police reform law.

PHOTO provided

In the meantime, area police chiefs say their ability to recruit and fill vacancies is on hold.

"If we needed someone to come in right away, we'd be in a bad place," said Michael Ziemba, interim police chief in Williamstown. Fortunately for the department, staffing is stable, he said.

“Even if we had new people we wanted to bring in ... the state doesn’t have any training in place. It’s going to make things harder, that’s for sure. Recruiting is hard to begin with.”

Strout, the Dalton chief, says that as her department waits like others for clarity on future training rules and options, it’s as if the reform imposed a hiring freeze. “I’m stuck right where I’m at, because the kid on my list has not been through the academy.”

Reform’s goals

In January, the state’s Municipal Police Training Committee halted the training of reserve police officers because of the reform law signed by Gov. Charlie Baker on Dec. 31.

Be patient, the committee said.



📄 DA, Pittsfield Police chief back police certification system in bill

“We are diligently reviewing the new law and gaining a better understanding of its requirements as they relate to our agency and the various law enforcement agencies we serve,” the group said in a Jan. 13 statement. “While we understand that there are questions about the status of reserve officers in the Commonwealth and the impact this law will have on numerous agencies ... we ask for your patience at this time as we develop a plan to move forward.”

Officers who already received training as reserve police will remain certified under the law. But, before those certifications expire, they must complete additional training.



10:15 a.m.: Dalton Police Sgt. Bustin Buzzella texts with his boss, Deanna Strout, the department's new chief, before heading out from the station Friday, to execute an arrest warrant with members of the state police detective unit.

The reform law, driven in large part by public outrage over police killings, brings an array of changes to how Massachusetts police departments operate. In terms of training, the law created a Peace Officer Standards and Training Commission, on which Pittsfield's Michael Wynn serves as the only police chief.

The new group has the power to investigate police misconduct, and to certify and decertify officers. If an officer is decertified, that person loses the protection of qualified immunity, which has shielded officers from civil lawsuits. The law also sets up a task force on the use of body cameras, calls for a review of Civil Service, bans chokeholds, requires new policies on the use of force and sets up three Legislative commissions to examine structural racism in criminal justice, among other provisions.

Costs of change

At recent annual town meetings in the Berkshires, chiefs of small departments briefed officials on the reform measure's fallout — particularly its costs.

In Lanesborough, Sorrell allocated more money for training for the coming year but saw his department's budget request be cut. Sorrell estimates that the cost of bringing the department's eight part-time officers up to the new training standard will exceed \$36,000 and could well be more.

"It's going to be interesting to see," he said.

One saving grace for town budgets is that the "bridge" training for current part-time officers might be held in groups over the next three years, perhaps by taking trainees in alphabetical order. The demand for training, even before the new law, had been

building during the pandemic, due to enrollment limits set to provide social distancing.



11 a.m.: Buzzella responds to a radio call for a domestic disturbance, less than one minute after leaving the scene of executing an arrest warrant. “One thing about working in a small town is,” Buzzella said, as he whipped around a tight corner at an intersection, “you need to know the streets really well and [know] the fastest way to get to them.”

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Sorrell has checked Lanesborough’s training list and thinks just two of the eight part-time officers might undergo training in the coming fiscal year.

“There are thousands of officers throughout the state who will have to meet this requirement,” said Sorrell, who retires June 30.

Local chiefs say they are waiting to get a fuller picture of what lies ahead, once the POST commission takes shape.

In Dalton, Chief Strout likens the change to having a law come along that declares that all nurses need to be registered nurses – with the additional training that would demand.

“The way it was done had a significant impact on us,” she recently told members of the Select Board. “It’s not just our department. It’s every department around us. It will be 12 to 14 months before we see a candidate start from a hire date now.”

“There was certainly no funding available to us to get this done,” she added. “We will not be hiring reserve officers any more.”

“It changes our staffing strategy,” said Joe Diver, the board’s chair.

“I don’t think people understand the impact of the police reform,” said Robert W. Bishop Jr., a board member.

Strout said she supports the police reform bill and values having a force with higher levels of training.

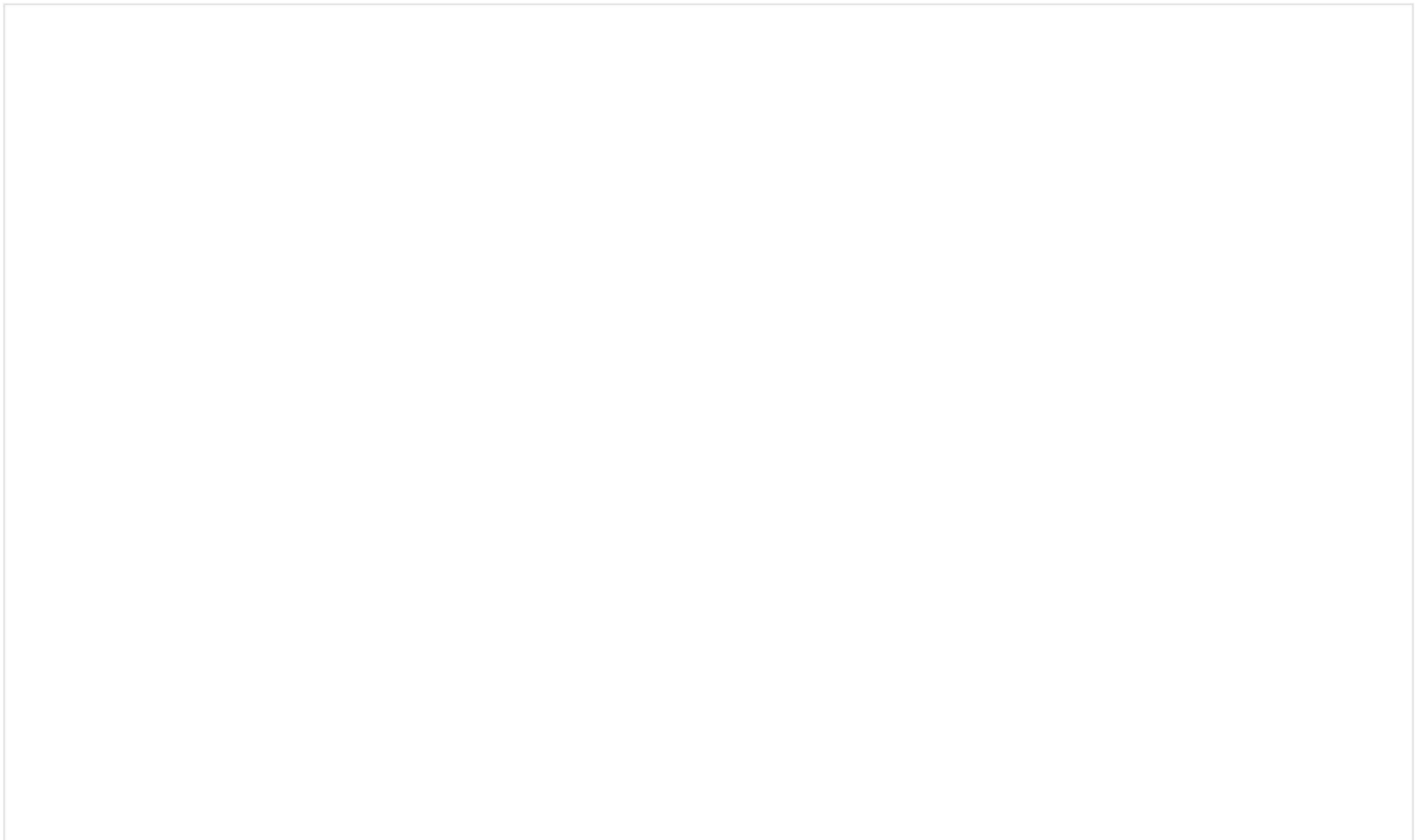
“Trust me, I have no issue with that level of training. I’m happy with that part of it. It’s a huge change that’s been forced upon us, but we’ll get there,” Strout said.

Photos: A ride-along with Dalton Police



Larry Parnass can be reached at lparnass@berkshireeagle.com and 413-588-8341.

MORE INFORMATION





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Larry Parnass

Managing editor for innovation

Larry Parnass joined The Eagle in 2016 from the Daily Hampshire Gazette, where he was editor in chief. His freelance work has appeared in the Washington Post, Boston Globe, Hartford Courant, Commonwealth Magazine and with the Reuters news service.