

Good cops

hard for small towns to keep

■ Longer hours, lower pay and poor benefits make keeping police officers a challenge for rural police departments.

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Police departments across rural New Mexico often have problems keeping qualified officers.

Even Hobbs, with a population of nearly 30,000, has trouble keeping good police officers. That problem is compounded for smaller agencies like Eunice, Tatum and Jal. At full staff, those departments have fewer than 10 officers.

P.C. Watson, the police chief in Tatum, said the problem has become so bad for his department that he just expects to lose new officers.

Like many in rural law enforcement, Watson attributes the high turnover to the difficulties of working in a

small department — longer hours, low pay and a poor benefits package. While small departments make every effort to pay and compensate their officers, Watson said a small town like Tatum — home to less than 1,000 people according to the 2000 Census — simply cannot match what larger communities can offer.

"They can get better pay almost anywhere," Watson said.

Watson's department, like many small departments, often hires uncertified officers and sends them to the law enforcement academy at New Mexico Junior College.

Once they become certified, however, those officers find a far richer job market. So

much so, that Watson has even had an officer quit just four days after completing the academy.

"I knew he was going to leave, everybody I expect to leave but I didn't expect it that fast. That was ridiculous," Watson said.

That particular officer graduated Dec. 7, 2000 and left the Tatum Police Department Dec. 11.

Watson said better pay would help reduce the turnover, but lack of a strong retirement package and other benefits also make it difficult to keep officers.

"We could probably keep them longer (with higher pay), but we wouldn't keep

them as long as we need to because we don't have retirement here," Watson said.

Beyond the disruption of losing staff so quickly, the high turnover rate at rural police departments also imposes a financial burden.

Watson estimated it costs the Tatum Police Department about \$7,500 for each officer they send to the academy at NMJC. While that might not sound like a great deal of money, for a city the size of Tatum it's a major burden.

"That's a heck of a lot because our tax base is lousy," Watson said.

Tatum is not alone in trying to retain police officers;

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Eunice and Jal have also had their share of difficulties.

Fred Johnson, the police chief in Eunice, said his department has fared a bit better than some rural departments — adding that they have one officer who has more than 15 years with the department of six officers — but they too have had struggles in hiring and retaining officers.

"We have a big problem, it's awful hard to compete with the larger departments around," Johnson said. "We have to work a little harder at getting officers."

He said Eunice had managed to go for about a decade without hiring an uncertified officer, but late last year hired one uncertified officer who is now

attending the academy at NMJC.

Johnson does, however, require a contract saying a new officer will stay with the Eunice department at least two years if the city helps them through the academy.

"How long a person will be here after the academy, you just keep your fingers crossed because you never know how long they may stay," Johnson said.

Larry Burns, police chief in Jal, said his department has also had trouble keeping officers, and echoed comments made by both Watson and Johnson about pay and benefits.

One other problem created by hiring an uncertified officer is that, while they are drawing a salary, they are not working full time patrolling the streets.

"You're paying that guy and he's not doing anything in your town," Burns said. "He's still not doing (anything) until you can get him through the academy."

Some departments try to get around the problem by hiring retired police officers from larger cities. Watson said his department had tried that, using the slower pace and low crime rate of rural southeast New Mexico as a recruitment tool, but found few people interested.

Burns said that might work, but added that the crime-free reputation of rural areas is largely a myth.

"Just because it's a small town doesn't mean you have less crime," Burns said. "You have the same crimes you have in a big city, it's just on a smaller scale."