Law Enforcement Recruitment and Retention: Challenges and Potential Solutions

Courts, Corrections and Justice Committee

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New Mexico Faces a Challenging Law Enforcement Staffing Environment, with Impacts on Public Safety

- Municipal agencies are facing high vacancy rates

- Agencies face challenges in recruiting, with fewer and less qualified applicants

- Retention is also a challenge, with early retirements rising

- Staffing shortages often lead to mandatory overtime, cuts to specialized units, reduced capacity for proactive policing…and more burnout

- **Recruitment and retention challenges threaten public safety and officer wellbeing**

Municipal Police Department	Vacancy Rate	Municipal Police Department	Vacancy Rate
Hobbs	33%	Portales	21%
Aztec	30%	Carlsbad	20%
Taos	25%	Belen	20%
Ruidoso	24%	Clovis	14%
Anthony	22%	Lovington	13%

National Trends

Recent studies show nationwide challenges in law enforcement recruitment and retention

78%

Surveyed agencies reporting difficulties in recruiting qualified officers

65%

Agencies reporting a decrease in the number of applicants over the past five years

50%

Agencies reporting that vacancies have increased over the past year

Source: International Assoc. of Chiefs of Police Report

Multiple Factors May Contribute to Recruitment & Retention Struggles

What we hear from municipal law enforcement (and other law enforcement)

- **Demoralization**: work seen as unvalued or ineffective (perception of "revolving door" for offenders)

- **Expanded duties**: officers serving as de facto social workers, substance abuse experts, mental health responders, adolescent behavior experts, and homelessness intervention specialists without adequate training or structural support (e.g. lack of strong behavioral health support structure)

- **Actual or perceived legal risks**: NM Civil Rights Act creates liability concerns

- **Pay gaps**: smaller agencies can't compete with larger departments or neighboring states

- **Reactive policymaking**: perception that policymaking is often a response to isolated events, not "big picture"

- **Generational trends**: fewer young people interested in law enforcement career, and fewer meet qualifications

Median Annual Pay for Law Enforcement by State

Legend: First-Line Supervisors, Officers
States (x-axis): CA, NV, TX, UT, AZ, NM, OK
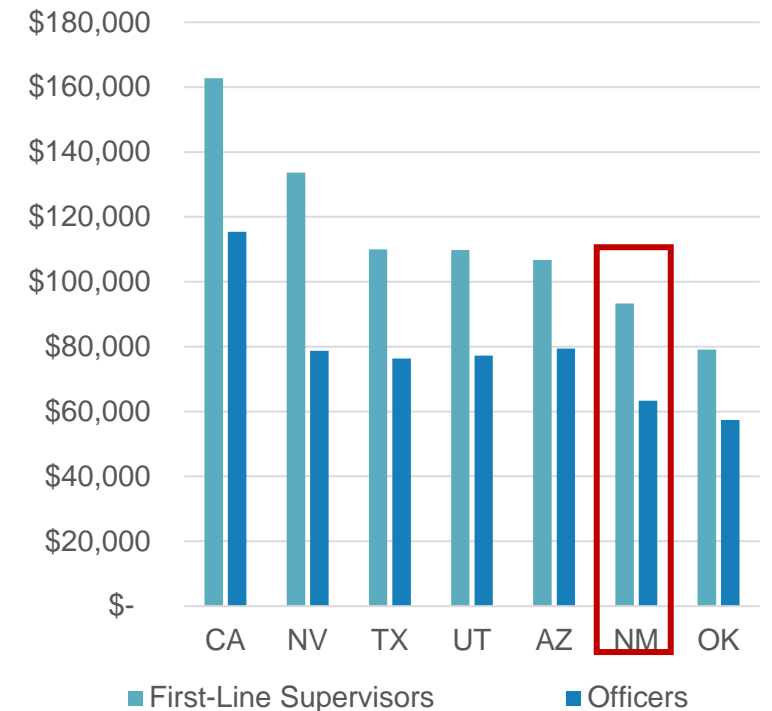
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024 data)

NMML/NMSIF Are Supporting Agencies with Targeted Programs

Support and Resources for Law Enforcement Include:

- Unlimited **mental health counseling** for officers and their families; post-crisis mental health support for department
- **Training and leadership development** for new and future chiefs
- Reimbursement for **bodyworn cameras**
- **Model policies** based on best practices, updated to conform with latest state and federal laws (provided through Lexipol)

- The **New Mexico Municipal League** represents all 106 municipalities in the state and supports a professional affiliate group for municipal police chiefs (along with 11 other professional affiliate groups); with significant collaboration with other law enforcement (county, state police, etc.)
- Through the **New Mexico Self-Insurers' Fund,** we insure 65+ municipal police departments

Potential Solutions Can Address Pay, Working Condition, and Other Issues

Potential Solutions Include:

Financial Incentives:

- Tax benefits for law enforcement (e.g property tax exemptions, income tax credit)
- Additional pay for specialized skills or degrees/certifications (e.g. bilingual, college degree, advanced certifications)
- Increased pay levels and establishment of minimum salaries
- Increased funding for small municipalities through Small Cities Assistance Fund, to boost law enforcement pay

Working Conditions and Protections:

- Expand workers' compensation presumptions for conditions commonly faced on the job (e.g. hearing loss, injuries to hips and lower back)
- Increase penalties for shooting/stabbing/feloniously assaulting and injuring an officer
- Minimum requirements for chief executives

Recruiting Strategies:

- Cross certification for out-of-state officers
- Strengthen recruiting programs at high schools, colleges/universities

Which strategies will move the needle?

NMML is Conducting an Evaluation to Identify Biggest Challenges; Identify Solutions that Will Move Needle

The evaluation will seek to answer key questions:

- What are the top reasons officers are leaving municipal law enforcement agencies in New Mexico?
- What factors most influence individuals to not apply for municipal law enforcement jobs?
- What structural or legal barriers may be harming recruitment and retention efforts?
- How do national trends in law enforcement recruitment and retention align or diverge from challenges in New Mexico?
- What are the most effective incentives and supports to improve recruitment and retention?
- **What actions could local governments, law enforcement agencies, the Legislature, the Executive, and other stakeholders take to move the needle on recruitment and retention?**

Sources of Insight

- ✓ **Interviews** with current and former law enforcement
- ✓ **Survey** of municipal law enforcement officers (and potentially other LE officers)
- ✓ **Hiring data** from municipal law enforcement departments (e.g. vacancy rates, salary data)
- ✓ **Comparative national research & best practices**

What Would Be Helpful for You to Know?

Legislative input needed:

- What questions would you like answered?
- What data would be useful for you?
- Other policy options to explore?

Conclusion: Complex Problem, But Solutions Are Within Reach

- We believe recruitment and retention challenges are solvable
- State and local partnership needed to support long-term sustainability of law enforcement profession and address public safety challenges
- Let's invest in what works and spend funds strategically
- NMML committed to working with policymakers to strengthen public safety across New Mexico

Thank You!

Questions?

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