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CW

Elkhart police chief discusses 'community policing' and staffing challenges

By BEN QUIGGLE - bquiggle@elkharttruth.com



Elkhart Truth photo/Ben QuiggleElkhart Police Department Chief Ed Windbigler addresses the Elkhart County League of Women Voters at their monthly meeting Wednesday. He spoke about department needs and how they are reaching out to the community.

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ELKHART — Elkhart Police Chief Ed Windbigler said a healthier economy and the number of police officers around the country being involved in violent conflicts are part of the reason his department is struggling to recruit qualified personnel.

Windbigler made his remarks before the Elkhart County League of Women Voters

Windbigler made his remarks before the Elkhart County League of Women Voters Wednesday afternoon. He gave an update on the issues the department faces and the community outreach that is being done to improve relationships between officers and city residents.

According to Windbigler, the department is allotted 131 officer positions and is currently 10 short at 121. With the seven new officers still in training, the department has only 114 active officers.

"That is a significant gap for a city of this size," he said.

Windbigler further explained that counting all the detectives and officers that do back-side functions at the police station, there are only 68 officers in the uniformed division — 56 patrol the streets while the others are supervisors. With the high volume of calls the department receives — 5,900 in February and more than 71,000 in 2016 — Windbigler said it is a task to keep the department running and provide essential services to the community.

Part of the issue is the long process new officers are required complete before hitting the streets on patrol, according to the chief. Windbigler said that after the department hires an individual they are gone for 15 weeks to the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy and then have to complete another 15 weeks of field training.

His recent hires just missed the cutoff for the next academy session and will have to wait three months before they can even go to the academy.

Retention at the department is not "terrible," according to Windbigler, but he noted that some recently hired officers have been scared away by national incidents where officers were hurt or killed.

"When the economy is good people are not looking for the lower-paying civil service jobs," he said. "You have to have a calling for this job and we want to make sure that we are getting officers that don't view this as just another job."

- Department complaints: Windbigler said that with the sheer number of calls the department gets he feels that officers do their jobs well and with minimal complaints. In 2016, there were over 71,000 calls for service and only 52 complaints filed, .07 percent of all the calls that were serviced by the department.

Only 13 of those complaints were forwarded to internal affairs.

"That is a very minimal number when you factor in the difficult situations that our officers are dealing with," he said.

He said that out of the 5,900 calls in February, officers only used force 14 times. Force could include tasing a suspect, using their hands to protect or prevent against harm, or pulling back a suspect who may be trying to flee.

- Department diversity: Windbigler said he would like to see more diversity on the force, but he has had little success in getting individuals from the African-American and Latino communities to apply for positions. He said the same goes for female officers.

"There isn't anything I can do if we don't get applicants," he said.

- Body cameras: Windbigler said that all uniformed officers now have their own body cameras, after the department received all new cameras from supplier Digital Ally in February. The former cameras were interfering with officer's radios and shutting off without warning.

