



Detention officers campaign for better pay

By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian

Sgt. Mark Harris has been grinding it out in Missoula for 19 years, policing a part of town where crooks and felons outnumber him 24 to one.

He's a turnkey. A jailer.

Working the day shift at the Missoula County Detention Facility on Mullan Road, Harris supervises a skeleton crew of 17 detention officers and is responsible for a cumbersome 370 inmates.

He carries no gun.

But holding a picket sign outside the Missoula County Courthouse on Friday, Harris said his work force is riddled with vacant positions, and for years his safety has been steadily compromised.

He said starting pay for a detention officer is so low, and the prospects for a decent wage increase are so grim, that recruiting and retaining qualified detention officers is a big problem.

"I should be working with 20 detention officers," Harris said. "Instead I have 17. It's gotten to the point where I'm worried about my safety."

Like every officer and union representative picketing Friday, Harris believes a pay increase would boost officer recruitment. It might also lend appeal to a profession notorious for its skyscraping employee turnover rate, he said.

Since the detention facility opened six years ago, 117 employees have made tracks, moving on to other, more lucrative professions.

"After a while, it's kind of demoralizing," Harris said. "You train someone in, and then they leave for better pay somewhere else."

Harris described a detention officer who left his job bartending and worked at the jail "just long enough to finish his training at the academy."

Then he returned to bartending, where the pay was better and the clientele more docile.

The last batch of job applications were so dismal, Harris said, most of the interviewees didn't make it past the background check.

But many detention officers are extremely qualified, and hang up their jailing jobs to pursue careers in other branches of law enforcement - similar jobs with fatter paychecks.

Each year, two bargaining units negotiate pay increases for Missoula's detention officers.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees represents the juvenile detention officers as well as the kitchen staff employed at the facility.

The Detention Officers Association of Missoula County represents approximately 70 adult-side officers; as required by law, the jail is divided into adult and juvenile sections.

As jailers negotiate their annual pay increase, their central case is the growing pay disparity between two jobs that are essentially the same.

In 1985, a starting Missoula County detention officer made 87 percent of what a starting sheriff's deputy earned. By January 2005, the starting detention officer's wage had fallen to 66 percent of what a starting deputy made.

And deputies don't have to negotiate for their pay increases.

Missoula County Sheriff Mike McMeekin's wages are set by law, and his deputies get a certain percentage based on his pay.

"But we do have to negotiate," said Dave Mitchell, president of the Detention Officers Association of Missoula County. "And as a result of that, we're lagging some \$6 behind what sheriff's deputies start at."

A starting detention officer makes \$12.18 an hour.

But McMeekin said the core issue for him is that the two positions are different, and each one needs to be paid on its own merits and not compared.

"If you wanted to take that argument and expand it out, deputy sheriffs are not paid as much as a neurosurgeon," he said. "We're talking two different positions."

McMeekin also said more pay wouldn't necessarily keep detention officers at the jail.

"We are already at or below the national average for employee turnover," McMeekin said. "It's a very high turnover profession. Lots of people move on to other jobs."

Sen. Carolyn Squires, D- Missoula, turned up at Friday's picket rally to show her support.

She said it's unfair for the county to pay sheriff's deputies more than detention officers.

Squires called it an equity issue.

"The detention officers deal with the exact same types of individuals," she said.

Squires was the primary sponsor of Senate Bill 370, which passed last legislative session.

Until SB370 passed, detention officers in Missoula were not eligible for their retirement pension package for 30 years. Sheriff's deputies, however, were eligible after 20 years.

"It was an equity issue then and it's a pay equity issue now," Squires said.

Harris said the prospect of retirement is the light at the end of his tunnel - it keeps him going.

"After a while, you just get in too deep," he said. "I'm already two-thirds of the way toward my 30-year retirement plan."

But wrangle all they will, county officials say there's just not any more money for Missoula County detention officers.

The county is currently offering detention officers a 3 percent total package which would provide for the annual 2 percent longevity step and a 1 percent increase on the base salary.

The unions are asking for an 8 percent increase - 5 percent more than the county's offer.

The additional 5 percent would cost approximately \$135,000.

Timm Twardoski, a representative of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said the county can afford the extra money.

Twardoski said the detention facility has been understaffed for years, operating below the authorized staffing levels for a safe work environment.

The authorized staffing level is the minimum number of staff that the National Institute of Corrections recommended in 2000.

So while the positions aren't filled, they're still open, and the money to fund them is starting to smell.

"They're fake positions," Twardoski said.

But McMeekin said he can't justify cutting the authorized staffing levels, even though the positions remain empty.

"If staffing level was cut, it would require overtime shifts to get the work done, so it's self-defeating," he said.

"The simple fact of the matter is the money is not there," McMeekin said. "It's just not in the public safety fund. We can't manufacture money and we can't operate in the red."

But Matt Thiel, legal counsel for the Detention Officers Association of Missoula County, said it's imperative that the county close the wage gap between detention officers and other law enforcement agencies.

"The pay disparity is built in, and it cannot be resolved without a significant wage increase," Thiel said. "The county has bought into the assumption that one group of uniformed employees is more important than the other."

Thiel said a \$15-per-hour starting wage for detention officers would be more attractive, and more competitive.

"With that, I'm confident we could solve these recruitment and retention issues," he said.

Awkwardly holding his picket sign, at a slant and over his shoulder, Harris wanted to make one thing clear:

"We're not here to be adversarial, we're here to get the point across," he said. "We're hoping that we can get the sheriff and county commissioners to find it in their hearts to free up a little money."

Reporter Tristan Scott can be reached at 523-5264 or at tscott@missoulian.com