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Police Forces, Their Ranks Thin, Offer Bonuses, Bounties and More

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By TIMOTHY EGAN

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SEATTLE, Dec. 26 - Among the depleted ranks of police departments throughout the country, it has come to this: desperate want ads offering signing bonuses to new recruits, and cops paying other cops to find new cops.

It seems nobody wants to be a police officer anymore, officials say. As a result, departments are taking a page from recruiters in sports and the corporate world. Here in King County, the most populous in the Pacific Northwest, the Sheriff's Office is trying a kind of bounty hunting: any deputy who can bring in someone who eventually becomes an officer will get a bonus of 40 hours of extra vacation time, worth up to \$1,300.

"This job used to be more enticing, and we didn't have to do a lot of marketing," said Sheriff's Deputy Jessica

Cline, the chief recruiter for the King County force. "Over time, it's become less attractive. We needed to do something."

But it is a competitive world out there among police recruiters. San Diego County, for instance, has already gone King County one better. "Put a star in your future - now offering a signing bonus of up to \$5,000," goes the Web advertisement for the San Diego County Sheriff's Department.

In a generation's time, the job of an American police officer, previously among the most sought-after by people with little college background, has become one that in many communities now goes begging. Experts find that the life has little appeal among young people, and those who might be attracted to it are frequently lured instead by aggressive counteroffers from the military. The problem is compounded by better pay at entry-level jobs in the private sector, where employment opportunities have recently brightened.

The resulting shortage of new officers, says Elaine Deck, who tracks recruitment matters for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, is the top concern among issues facing law enforcement across the country. Nearly every police department at a recent statewide meeting in California reported being at least 10 percent short of the officers it needed. The Los Angeles Police Department has about 700 officers fewer than its full complement of 10,000, says Cmdr. Kenny Garner, who oversees recruiting there.

"When I started out in the 1970's, there were lines around the block of people waiting to take the police test, and I had to sleep overnight in an elementary school to get my place," Commander Garner said. "It's not an easy sell anymore."

Similarly, the test to join King County's ranks now draws only a small fraction of the 3,000 who used to take it.

In the face of developments like those, police agencies have tried a variety of enticements.

"Walk-ins accepted for immediate testing!" says an advertisement from the Los Angeles police force, which at one point sent recruiters to Florida to troll for prospective officers among college students lying on the beach during spring break.

There, Fort Lauderdale's come-on for police academy prospects says "no maximum age," along with "up to five weeks' vacation."

The New York Police Department recently placed advertisements in newspapers in and around Buffalo, part of a broad sweep to find recruits in the economically depressed upstate region.

Many cities have raised salaries well above the rate of inflation and are offering benefits like discount mortgages. Lexington, Ky., will give new officers up to \$7,400 for a down payment on a home.

The Los Angeles police are offering \$500 to any city employee who can bring in a police recruit who makes it through the academy, and another \$500 if the prospect becomes a sworn officer. But the bonus, along with recruit inducements that include a retirement payment of \$250,000 after 20 years in addition to a pension, has yet to turn

the tide.

"We're trying to cook up some other things so we can get back in the game," Commander Garner said, in a bow to the competition.

The pay in most departments remains competitive with that in other jobs that do not necessarily require a college degree. A rookie officer in Los Angeles will start at \$51,000 a year - certainly better than the starting salary for many teachers, of whom a degree is demanded. Police jobs also typically come with comfortable vacation, health care and retirement packages.

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