



Vacancies, overtime, assaults plague Chatham County Sheriff's Department, jail

Kelly Quimby

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More than 100 employees of the Chatham County Sheriff's Department have vacated their posts since early November — leaving the law enforcement agency with a high rate of unfilled positions and even higher overtime costs.

Of the former employees who left the sheriff's department or the county jail since Nov. 1, more than 70 resigned, about 20 retired and another 10 or so were terminated, according to county personnel records. The Savannah Morning News in April requested the documents, along with case files associated with accusations of sexual harassment at the department, after receiving tips from readers.

Sheriff's Department Spokesman Pete Nichols reported that as of the end of May, the Chatham County jail was short 45 officers. Nichols did not immediately provide requested information about the staffing situation at the Sheriff's Department's enforcement bureau, which is responsible for serving warrants and providing security at the Chatham County courthouse, along with other administrative functions.

It's clear, however, that under-staffing in the two departments has played some part in overtime costs in this year's budget, which are now double what was originally set aside this fiscal year. A report provided by the Chatham County finance department puts the total overtime costs at the sheriff's department and jail so far this year at more than \$2.4 million. The county originally budgeted a combined \$1.2 million for overtime in both departments.

Chatham County Sheriff John Wilcher hinted Thursday that he might have good news on the horizon as it comes to filling his departments' vacancies. While he declined to comment further, Wilcher said he's due to meet with Chatham County Manager Lee Smith and Commission Chairman Al Scott to discuss what can be done in the upcoming budget.

As currently drafted, the budget does include an additional \$176,985 for merit increases and pay range adjustments for the sheriff's department, along with nearly \$1.4 million for additional positions, merit increases and pay range adjustments at the jail.

In the past, the sheriff has said it's been difficult to recruit new personnel to the sheriff's department, where the starting salary of \$34,500 is lower than starting salaries for police in the surrounding municipalities. Indeed, according to a list of personnel actions at the department

produced by Chatham County, several of the officers who resigned since November took up positions with the Savannah-Chatham police department, where the starting salary is just more than \$35,000 before certification, and \$39,230 after new recruits complete training at the Georgia Post Academy.

Accusations of sexual harassment and assault

Not all the vacancies were created by officers leaving for better pay, however.

Included in the list of former employees of the Chatham County Sheriff's Department and the Chatham County Jail who left involuntarily since November were the names of a correctional officer fired earlier this year for the alleged sexual assault of an inmate, and a high-ranking officer who was terminated from his post amid accusations of sexual harassment from a subordinate employee.

A third former officer, a 20-year veteran of the Chatham County Sheriff's Department, retired in lieu of termination earlier this year after he was accused of sexual harassment by a coworker.

Wilcher repeated Thursday that he has a no tolerance policy for abuse in his departments. It was a statement he's made twice in press conferences to announce he's terminated employees for abusive behavior since he was elected sheriff last spring. Most recently, the sheriff held a press conference in April to announce the firing of former Correctional Officer Jermaine Minor, who was charged with sexual assault, making false statements and violating his oath of office for assaulting at least four inmates in the jail's custody. His case is pending court action.

"I'm not having anybody take advantage of the inmates, and I'm not having inmates taking advantage of my officers," Wilcher said. "We have a policy and procedures on it and we have classes on it. ... We try to train (the officers) and teach them everything we can to protect them, and we do the same thing with inmates. We give them a handbook ... so they will know what's going on."

The sheriff said he also exercised his no tolerance policy two months before Minor's firing and arrest, after a less-publicized internal complaint. According to an internal affairs report produced as part of the News' open records request, former Sgt. Lance Lang was terminated from his post at the sheriff's department in February for violating several policies and procedures, including those regarding general conduct, immoral conduct and statements made during investigations.

He'd been accused of sexual harassment by a subordinate employee, but internal affairs investigators were unable to prove whether Lang had inappropriately touched the officer. However, the investigation report noted that while the accuser appeared to be truthful in a voice stress analysis conducted as part of the investigation, Lang's test "showed deception on many of the questions asked."

Chief Deputy Billy Freeman wrote in his termination letter in February that Lang's firing was based on the "totality of the employment circumstances" and his violations of sheriff's department policies. According to the investigation file, Lang's accuser was also fired from her

post at the jail “due to the admissions and/or statements made.” She was ultimately reinstated upon appeal, but resigned soon after.

The accuser in the Lang investigation is one of a few sheriff’s department employees interviewed as part of an internal affairs investigation of sexual harassment at the sheriff’s department to resign in the past few months.

In a separate case opened at the end of last year, internal affairs investigators determined that former Lt. Gregory Agee had touched a coworker on more than one occasion, despite her making it clear the contact was unwelcome. The file also contained photocopies of text messages sent by Agee to another coworker — a witnesses in the sexual harassment investigation — that contained demeaning language.

Agee’s employment at the jail ended in November with a retirement in lieu of termination. His accuser and the witness who provided copies of the text messages resigned in the months that followed. Since the original request for documents submitted April 28, the Savannah Morning News made subsequent requests for information on the circumstances surrounding their resignations, but no information was provided by press time.

Sexual harassment project

It’s difficult to determine where Chatham County stands in comparison to the rest of the country when it comes to sexual harassment and other misconduct because there is no national database tracking these cases, said Jonathan Blanks, managing editor of the Cato Institute’s National Police Misconduct Reporting Project.

Blanks said the project, which was originally initiated by a journalist in 2009, is meant to inform the public on how the process works when law enforcement officers run afoul of the law. Based on the cases his organization has tracked from media reports and other public information, Blanks said, it seems that sexual misconduct is fairly prevalent among police.

“You have these sort of insular cultures that are sometimes male dominated and decades-old ‘good ol’ boy’ networks,” Blanks said. “It’s not that uncommon.”

He pointed to a 2015 blog post he authored about an Associated Press investigation into sexual misconduct by police officers. The investigation had uncovered about 1,000 cases where officers had been de-certified for sexual misconduct, he wrote, although that figure was likely low because of discrepancies in reporting, prosecution or administrative discipline.

Blanks’ post listed 130 sexual misconduct cases the National Police Misconduct Reporting Project had tracked in 2015, including one in Chatham County, in which a deputy was fired for sexual assault of an inmate and filing false statements.