

ADN Compass Article

As the Business Manager of the Public Safety Employee Association (PSEA), it was with some interest that I read Sunday's Daily News article entitled "Top Brass will review fish, game protection". PSEA is the union that represents State Troopers and our members are concerned with the Department's merger of the traditional "Blue Shirt" and "Brown Shirt" Divisions.

We should be clear about the reason the Department combined Patrol and Wildlife Enforcement. It is the result of the Department's failure to recruit and retain qualified personnel. The Department has more than fifty authorized Trooper positions unfilled while at the same time all command positions are staffed. While we believe that the State should revert back to two separate divisions under the Department of Public Safety, the questions that should be asked are; Why has the Department failed abysmally in its efforts to attract and retain officers, and what can be done to reverse the effects of this failure?

The first problem that must be addressed to retain working troopers is low moral. In my twenty-five years of union activism, I have never seen or worked with an organization whose employees have lower moral. The majority of Troopers feel that the Department that they work for does not care about their welfare. I do not say this lightly nor do I wish to place blame, but, if we are to keep troopers in the field they must feel that they are being supported by the Commissioner's office and upper level command staff.

The work load on Troopers is incredible; Troopers in our urban posts are in some instances over 100 investigative reports behind. Unless the paperwork gets done, District Attorneys can't do their work and some "not so nice folks" remain on the street. Troopers work forced overtime on their weekends in order to complete paperwork and even then must choose what crimes are important enough to get a rapid response during their regular duty hours.

The second issue regarding retention is the simple issue of economics. At one time Alaska's State Troopers were among the best paid and best trained police officers in the nation. Alaska's Trooper salaries have now slipped to 16th and continue to fall behind. The State must pay its professional police force more money. We were encouraged when salaries for Commissioners were increased by over thirty percent. Our members hoped that some small amount might trickle down to their level. We proposed re-classifying our members thereby increasing salaries by eight percent. That request was met with a refusal and our Troopers continue to move to city police forces that pay more and don't require relocation to rural posts with substandard and even condemned housing.

Finally the Department must look at its recruitment and training policy. Only 18 recruits graduated from an initial group of 30 at the end of the last Trooper Academy. In the immediately preceding Academy, the attrition rate approached nearly fifty percent. One might argue that the Academy is rigorous and that it is a good thing that a large percentage of recruits are washed out. That argument doesn't stand up to scrutiny. The

State screens hundreds of applicants for every final successful graduate. Every applicant has a background check, and a psychological and physical evaluation. These applicants want to be Troopers. Either there is something wrong with the recruitment process or there is a problem with the Academy. Even Harvard doesn't have this attrition rate.

The Department's failure to recruit and retain quality officers negatively impacts our membership. It is our members who must answer dangerous calls without adequate back up and who must work more hours than is safe. We find it incredible that only the "top brass" is to review the Departments policy on wildlife enforcement. The Department's policies have created the problems we now all face. It is time that members of the public and the Troopers who are in the field offer some suggestions. PSEA would welcome an invitation by the Governor and the Commissioner to help craft meaningful solution to these problems.