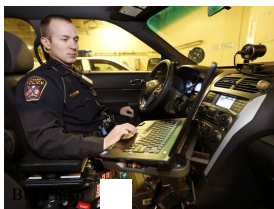


A better way to hire police officers?

Kathy A. Bolten, kbolten@dmreg.com 10:57 p.m. CST November 16, 2014



(Photo: Christopher Gannon/The Register)

Jacob Miller spent a year applying for openings at Iowa law enforcement agencies before he was hired as a police officer in Ankeny.

He filled out more than 10 different job applications, all of varying lengths. He took several written exams and physical fitness tests.

"Everyone had the same criteria that you had to meet," said Miller, 24, who previously was in the U.S. Coast Guard. "Why do all of that four or five different times when you could just do it once?"

Des Moines-metro area police chiefs agree and are studying ways to streamline the hiring process, a move that could save taxpayer dollars, provide a regional location to screen candidates and administer exams, and allow job candidates to fill out just one application and undergo the testing process just once.

The chiefs also hope an improved recruitment process will lead to a larger and more diverse pool of candidates.

Law enforcement officials from more than a dozen metro-area communities began meeting this fall as part of a Capitol Crossroads subcommittee tasked with finding ways to cut costs and end duplication of some procedures. Capitol Crossroads is a regional planning effort to further growth and prosperity in central Iowa.

A streamlined hiring process for police officers could be in place by spring, Ankeny police Chief Gary Mikulec said.

"I think this is a great opportunity to look at an issue that could save the taxpayer some money and save the candidates some time," Mikulec said. "We just need to make sure it's beneficial to all the cities."

West Des Moines police Chief Shaun LaDue said a streamlined process also could help departments get new officers on the street more quickly.

"Typically, we can't get approval to fill a position until it's been vacated," LaDue said. "That could mean from the time we post the application to the time the officer is on the street, nine or 10 months could have passed. That means we're paying overtime because we have a vacant position."

If a list of candidates that have passed the exams is already available, that could help expedite the hiring process, he said.

Streamlined process has worked elsewhere

The concept is not new.

In Connecticut, for instance, company works with police and fire departments to recruit and test job candidates, said Sean Cassidy, president of PoliceApps.com (<http://PoliceApps.com>). The service is free to cities; candidates pay the company a fee to take the tests.

"All of that redundancy is an inefficient approach to hiring," Cassidy said. Streamlining the system is "good for the applicants as well. Now they don't have to take a test for each and every department they apply at. You do that enough times, it becomes a part-time job for you."

Cassidy said one drawback to the streamlined process is that departments compete for the same candidates. "But you're doing that now anyway, so it's not a new problem," he said.



"Everyone had the same criteria that you had to meet," Ankeny police Officer Jacob Miller said of the job application process he went through at different police departments. "Why do all of that four or five different times when you could just do it once?" (Photo: Christopher Gannon/The Register)

In 2007, 11 northern Iowa law enforcement agencies began working together to recruit and hire officers. The agencies share the costs to advertise open positions. They also work together to administer the state-mandated exams. A list of candidates who pass is shared with the departments.

"It's worked great," Estherville Police Chief Brent Shattow said. "It's increased our application pool dramatically."

Previously, the department may have had 16 applicants for an open job, and only half would show up to take the physical fitness test, he said.

"We'd only have four or five names on our certified list. Now we're looking at a list that's grown to 28 people," Shattow said.

Police chiefs in the Des Moines area want to develop a joint application and collectively set testing dates for the physical fitness and written tests.

Doing those things would save time and money, area police chiefs said.

The first hurdles police officer job candidates must clear are set by the state: the physical fitness and written exams. Individual departments each have additional requirements candidates must meet.

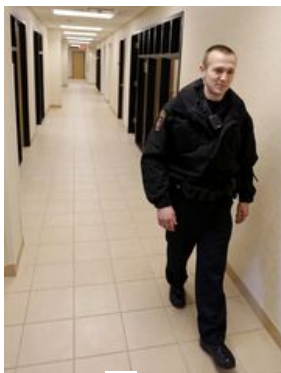
Some, for example, administer polygraphs. Others follow Civil Service guidelines as well as interview candidates one or more times. Individual departments would continue to do those things, Mikulec said.

Recruitment costs add up quickly

In Ankeny, the department spends about \$3,000 per applicant simply to administer the state-mandated tests, Mikulec said. By the time a new officer completes his or her training, the city will have spent \$18,000 to \$20,000 on them, Mikulec said.

Saving even a few thousand dollars would be beneficial, he said.

Another potential for savings: reducing the overtime now spent while administering exams.



Currently, when police departments administer physical fitness tests, they have to pull several officers off the street to help oversee the exams. That means overtime, which departments work to curtail, the chiefs said.

If the physical fitness tests are given once a quarter, for instance, departments could schedule one or two of their officers to help oversee the exams. The overtime expense would diminish if officers from several departments administer the fitness test, officials said.

"We are all trying to find ways to be good stewards of resources from the taxpayers," LaDue said.

But, moving to a more streamlined hiring process won't be easy, some chiefs said.

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Ankeny police Officer Jacob Miller spent a year applying to 10 different departments and taking numerous tests before getting hired by the Ankeny Police Department. *(Photo: Christopher Gannon/The Register)*

"It sounds simple, but it isn't," Waukee police Chief John Quinn said. "There's lots of questions that need answered. How will advertisements be handled? Which agency will be the repository for the applications? Which department handles the IT part of the process?"

"These are not barriers to success, but they do need to be worked out," he said.

The role the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy also needs to be determined, officials said. The academy, at Camp Dodge in Johnston, provides some services to individual departments for a fee. One of the questions officials have is whether it's more cost effective to form a collaborative group or work through the academy.

Assistant Director Judy Bradshaw said the academy is willing to play a role in the process but must also consider finances. "We'd like to support them," she said.

Joint training also possible

Police officers must undergo mandated training, recertification and professional development every few years, and area chiefs are reviewing ways to provide it in a more efficient and effective way.

Some joint training sessions are already held. For instance, some communities annually hold joint firearms recertification sessions. A group that is part of a Capitol Crossroads subcommittee is looking at other training that could be held jointly and scheduled three to five years out.

"If we know in advance what's going to be taught, then we can plan for it," West Des Moines police Chief Shaun LaDue said. "Everyone would get similar training, and that's important."

Among possibilities: recertification in defensive driving and precision immobilization technique, or PIT, a pursuit tactic used to stop a fleeing driver.

No timeline has been set on deciding the feasibility of joint training efforts.

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