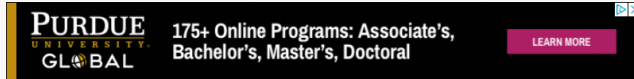


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# Many police departments are short-staffed while a few feel 'very fortunate.' Find out if your department is healthy or hurting.

**Erik S. Hanley**  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 6:00 a.m. CT Aug. 24, 2022 | Updated 4:42 p.m. CT Aug. 24, 2022

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Franklin Police Chief Rick Oliva speaks to the media after a male who pointed a gun at police was shot and killed by police after two separate car jackings and a short car pursuit on Friday, September 3. *Evan Casey / Now News Group*

A recent incident in which two Milwaukee police officers were injured illustrates how the national shortage of law enforcement is being felt locally.

[A robbery suspect bit two Milwaukee detectives](#) Aug. 4 as they were trying to make an arrest. The detectives' request for backup had been denied because of a lack of available officers, according to the Milwaukee Police Association.

Association President Andrew Wagner said there were no other officers available because of staffing shortages. Officers are retiring early, and some are leaving for new jobs, he said.

"I think they're looking for less demand on their life and a community that is more supportive of their actions," Wagner said. "I know the city is in a crunch for the budget, but they've been taking and taking for the last three or four years — deep cuts in the police budget. The crime rate has doubled. It's counterproductive."

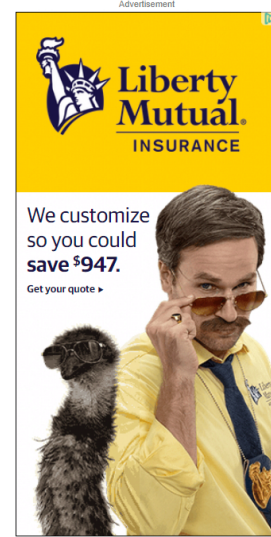
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The number of sworn police staff in Milwaukee has decreased by about 19% since 2000; the Milwaukee Police Department currently has more than 200 vacancies.

Shortages of officers, as well as applicants, are hitting not only large cities but also suburban areas nationwide. A [2019 survey by the Police Executive Research Forum](#) found 86% of police agencies reported an officer shortage.



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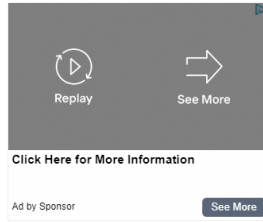


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## Franklin police hiring is at 'a critical stage'

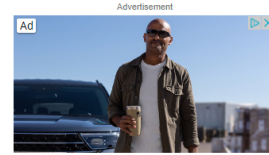
Franklin Police Chief Rick Oliva told the City Council in 2022 the hiring situation for police officers is at "a critical stage."

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"Right now, we have basically no viable candidates," he said at a recent meeting, where the council voted to change the job description for police officers in an effort to make it easier to attract applicants.

Franklin previously required applicants to complete 60 college credit hours at a police academy before applying. Now, the department will sponsor candidates to obtain those credits within five years of their hiring date, which is the standard in Wisconsin, according to Oliva. The move came after the department ran an ad in a national magazine that garnered zero applicants.



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A graphic for an NBA Preview. It features two circular images of basketball players. The text reads "SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE" in small letters, followed by "NBA Preview" in large, bold letters. Below that, it says "Explore 40 pages of team previews, schedules, and betting favorites to win the NBA title and MVP award." At the bottom, there is a blue link that says "Read Now in the eNewspaper".

Another [survey by the Police Executive Research Forum](#), in 2021, received responses from 194 agencies nationwide. It found agencies are filling only 93% of authorized positions. Fewer new officers were hired, and resignations increased by 18% in 2020-21 compared with the previous year. Additionally, there was a 45% increase in the retirement rate, according to the survey.

## Germantown is having to put new hires through the police academy

Germantown also previously only hired candidates who had already gone through the academy, but, like Franklin, that policy has changed.



Germantown Police Chief Mike Snow Germantown Police Department

"We're having to put people through the academy," said Germantown Chief Mike Snow. "It takes about 10 months from start to when they can go on patrol."

Paradoxically, that assumes candidates can even get into the academy.

Local academies are at Waukesha County Technical College and Milwaukee Area Technical College. There are also academies in Wisconsin Rapids, Janesville and the Fox Valley. Despite numerous options, a lack of class space seems to be an issue compounding the staffing problems.

"We would love for academies to run more classes," Snow said. "We're in a position to wait for classes. They're all full of sworn people that are hired."

New hires for the Germantown Police Department get a reduced wage while they go through the academy and then are upgraded to the contractual wage.

## Oconomowoc police have seen an increase in retirements

"We need to increase the number of police academies in Wisconsin to meet the demand that law enforcement has," said Oconomowoc Police Chief James Pfister. "Numerous candidates want to attend police academies, but they are all full at this time."

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Oconomowoc has been fortunate that it has been able to fill all its open positions, Pfister noted.

However, the number of applications, now usually averaging about 30 or 40, has decreased "significantly," he said.

And, reflecting the national trend, the Oconomowoc department has seen an increase in retirements.

"The criticism and negativity of the profession has caused the older generation of officers to retire earlier than they would have in the past," Pfister said.

Pfister added that having a brand-new facility and the latest technology may help Oconomowoc attract applicants "along with a great community that supports law enforcement with a family atmosphere."

The city's last recruitment effort brought in fully certified officers or certifiable officers, Pfister said. Unlike Germantown and Franklin, the city doesn't sponsor hires at the academy — but that could change.

"We are evaluating the sponsorship programs that are available for the next hiring process," Pfister said.

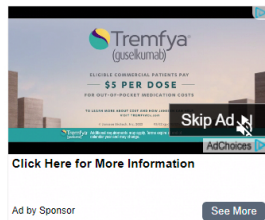
### Franklin police need to fill four vacant positions

"Years ago, we could get up to 300 applicants for a position posting," Oliva said. "Over the last couple of years, we're lucky to get 10 to 15."

Franklin has four vacant positions, and the department expects at least one retirement this fall and several in 2023. Oliva said the Franklin Police Department has 61 sworn staff.

"Having these many positions vacant significantly affects our ability to respond to calls for service efficiently and effectively," Oliva said. "We've had to adjust our staffing and increase overtime to address this situation."

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When backup is needed it can come from both internal and external sources.

"If all officers on a shift are on an assignment when someone needs assistance, one or more will break away to back up another officer, if possible, and/or a nearby department is requested to assist," he said. "This does happen on occasion."

### South Milwaukee police fill two of four vacancies

South Milwaukee Police Chief Bill Jessup said the department just filled two of its four vacancies.

"While vacancies may result in some additional overtime, we are still able to respond to calls without any delay, and we are not experiencing any officer safety issues," Jessup said.

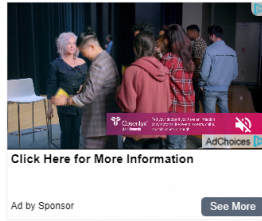
South Milwaukee gets between 50 and 100 applicants when it recruits. That's a decrease from 120 to 130 applicants three or four years ago. Jessup said many applicants don't have the proper qualifications, don't pass the written exam or fail the physical.

Snow said Germantown has a budget for 34 sworn officers, and the department is down five positions.

"Our biggest challenge is that so many of our calls require a response from multiple officers and are complex calls that take anywhere from an hour to several hours to resolve," Snow said. "During that time there may be no officers available to patrol the remainder of the village, so additional calls for services require officers to clear

the remainder of the village, so additional calls for service require officers to create, potentially creating officer safety issues where those assisting officers are pulled away. Frequently, these calls coming in also require a response from multiple officers.”

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Snow also said it's more common now for officers to retire early. Last year, the department lost three experienced officers, including two supervisors.

“It kind of really devastated us to try and replace all that experience,” Snow said.

But with the exception of retirements, unlike some, Germantown hasn't had many other resignations.

One thing that has increased is overtime, and the Germantown Police Department is already at its budgeted level for 2022. Time for proactive patrols such as traffic enforcement has been affected.

“Traffic issues are still a high priority with residents, but unassigned time available to officers to perform these functions has been significantly impacted over the years,” Snow said.



Sgt. Abby Pavlik of the Wauwatosa Police Department said the city is “working through the age of resignation.” *Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

### **Wauwatosa Police Department has 10 vacancies**

Sgt. Abby Pavlik of the Wauwatosa Police Department said the city is “working through the age of resignation.”

Targeted recruitment, rebranding, transparency, monetary incentives and lateral transfer incentives are among the strategies the department is employing to try to deal with the candidate shortage.

“We are balancing police services with the current staffing we have,” Pavlik said. “We are trying to avoid a diminishment of services through innovation, the use of technology, bolstered recruitment practices — without sacrificing the quality of our new hires — and working directly with the public in a shared responsibility to public safety approach.”

Wauwatosa has seen a significant decrease in applications in recent years, Pavlik said. During the last hiring phase, the city received 51 applications, of which 43 met the minimum requirements. One positive to a smaller candidate pool is the department can “spend more time and attention on the current applicants,” she said.

The Wauwatosa Police Department has 10 vacancies.

“We are providing 100% of police services with 78% of our staffing needs being met. This has caused significant burnout and exhaustion levels with our officers and staff.”

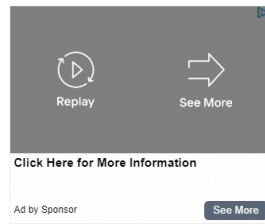
SGT. ABBY PAVLIK, WAUWATOSA POLICE DEPARTMENT



"We are providing 100% of police services with 78% of our staffing needs being met," Pavlik said. "This has caused significant burnout and exhaustion levels with our officers and staff."

Wauwatosa has hired some community service officers to assist officers with low-level calls for service in an attempt to alleviate the pressure, which includes providing enhanced police services at the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center and Mayfair mall.

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### West Allis police fill the majority of vacancies

West Allis Deputy Police Chief Robert Fletcher said his department has been fortunate and able to fill the majority of its vacancies — though not all of them.

"We have not seen a decrease in the quality of police service," he said. "But we have not been at 100% of our budgeted positions."

Fletcher said the applicant pool has dried up over the last decade, calling it "a concerning trend." He said that during the last five police officer recruitments (usually one or two a year) the department averaged 16 applications. The department currently has three open positions out of its budgeted 126 sworn staff members.

"In 2010, we had over 75 applicants for the position of police officer at a time when the WAPD required applicants to have a bachelor's degree," he said. "Our current recruitment process had only 11 applicants, and currently we do not require a bachelor's degree (and) an applicant only must have 60 college credits earned."

West Allis hasn't seen any unusual increases in retirements. The department also has enough staff to provide backup when needed without excessive overtime.



Pressure was on local law enforcement in 2020 when demonstrations broke out in Wauwatosa over shooting deaths over the past five years by then Wauwatosa Police Officer Joseph Mensah. *Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

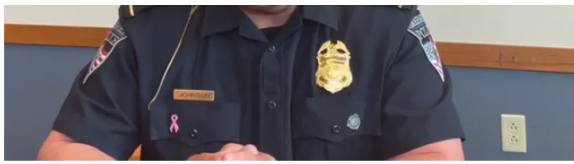
### Greenfield police are 'very fortunate' to have many applicants

Greenfield has been "very fortunate," generally receiving 50 to 75 applicants with ongoing recruiting, according to Police Chief Jay Johnson. But that is a drop from the 1990s when Johnson started and officers were competing against 100 to 150 people for every vacancy.

Johnson said Greenfield has a lot of community support and is "kind of that sweet spot."

"It's not a small community with not much activity, but it's also not Milwaukee where maybe it's too much activity," he said. "Our reputation is pretty strong in the law enforcement community. I do think a lot of it is reputation."





Greenfield Police Chief Jay Johnson said his department is fortunate to have strong support from the community. *Greenfield Police Department*

**RELATED:** [Cedarburg Police Department turns to Ozaukee County, installs Safe Space system after losing dispatchers](#)

### **Cedarburg police are getting steady applicants**

Cedarburg Police Chief Michael McNerney also feels “very lucky” his department has been getting steady applicants. He doesn’t take the credit, however.

“The city takes care of its officers through benefits and pay,” he said. “The city government and citizens support us.”

McNerney estimated the department gets about 70 applicants from multiple states when it recruits. Cedarburg will sponsor candidates at the police academy.

“I think it’s out there the city takes care of the guys,” he said. “I tell the guys we’re spoiled up here.”

He said the department has “some of the best equipment,” and unlike many departments with a pool of shared equipment, the “guys get their own stuff.”

“We don’t have many leaving,” he said. “They spend their whole career here.”

Cedarburg changed a few policies recently that might have helped keep candidates interested. Tattoos are allowed up to the wrist and on the legs, and facial hair is also allowed.

“I think it’s getting more common you can have facial hair now,” he said.

McNerney said he feels bad when he goes to meetings with chiefs from multiple departments and hears about the staffing issues they’re facing.

### **Solutions include community support and funding**

Demonstrations and marches in 2020 followed the death of George Floyd while he was in police custody in Minnesota. Snow said the unrest that followed and the “defund the police hysteria” didn’t help the profession.

“People quickly found out what defund the police would look like,” he said, “An emphasis on law and order happened very quickly. Cities that were very tough on law enforcement realized they had to get back to fighting crime and getting tough on crime. It turned into a horrible situation for so many cities.”

Jessup said the increased turnover in his department, including officers retiring earlier and others resigning is, in part, “because of the climate of policing” the last few years.

Johnson acknowledged the actions of some police officers are “inexcusable” but said the key to having a quality police force is community support.

“Every community has got to get behind their police,” Johnson said. “They are there serving you. There are bad apples, but when you cut funding you cut training dollars. I truly do believe if the image of a police officer and support continue to grow publicly it will continue to grow as a profession.”

McNerney shared similar feelings.

“Communities realize you can’t defund the police and not expect crime to go up,” McNerney said. “Cities are realizing you have to work with the police department.”

McNerney said a chief can only do so much when it comes to recruitment and that city leadership is equally important.

“Get behind your officers and support them,” he said. “There are issues; I think they’re small now. I’m all for accountability, but (officers) also have to know you have their back.”

Jessup said when people don’t feel the profession is supported and respected they don’t choose to go in that direction with their lives. He said “time and a consistent message on a national scale” is needed.

Snow had suggestions for how departments could do a better job tackling the problem.

“We have to get into the schools, get young people excited about this job, get them excited about the profession,” he said. “It’s a matter of engaging more and understanding that generation has a different approach.”



Cedarburg Police Officer Eric Weisenberger helps a youngster with her casting technique during the inaugural Cops & Bobbers fishing event hosted by Cedarburg Police Department at Cedar Creek Park in 2018. The free catch-and-release event provided children a fun opportunity to interact with law enforcement officers while learning fishing techniques and water safety. *Scott Ash/Now News Group*

Pavlik said "there is less interest in the profession, a lack of public support nationwide and also a lack of understanding by the public of what 21st-century policing looks like." Law enforcement is only part of the job, which includes engaging the community, building trust, humanizing the profession, she said.



Oconomowoc Police lead the annual Independence Day Parade through town on Saturday, July 2, 2022. Scott Ash / Now News Group

"This is a complex issue," Fletcher said. "Certainly, in recent years condemnation and negative perception of policing on a larger, national scale has a direct impact on individuals wanting to become police officers."

Oliva said he is "very concerned for society in general for the level of vitriol and antipathy toward police officers." He said that sentiment, with an "eroding of compensation," has reduced qualified police officer candidates drastically across the country in addition to veteran officers leaving the profession.

"This should concern everyone," he said.

Contact Erik S. Hanley at [erik.hanley@jrn.com](mailto:erik.hanley@jrn.com). Like his [Facebook page](#) and follow him on [Twitter](#) at [@ES\\_Hanley](#).

**More:** [The Greendale Police Department again has a dog among its ranks, but he doesn't have a name yet](#)

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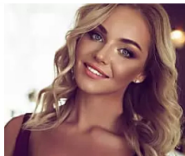
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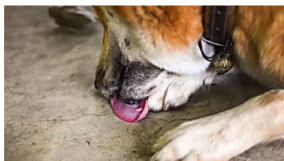
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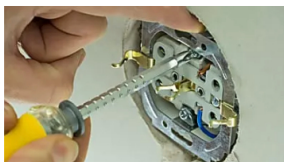
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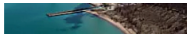
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