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Montana Legislative Audit Division

Performance Audit Summary

Montana Highway Patrol — June 2004

Introduction

Our performance audit of the Montana Highway Patrol (MHP) focused on MHP's ability to meet statutory mandates relative to public safety with existing resources.

MHP command stated the major challenge facing the agency was the issue of officer pay and retention. The number of patrol officers has not changed since 1972 despite increases in state population, number of vehicles, and the number of miles driven on Montana highways.

Background

MHP is the largest law enforcement agency in the state, with a current authorized strength of 206 uniformed personnel. MHP is responsible for enforcing Montana's traffic-related laws. Offenders may be issued a citation (ticket), as well as be arrested and jailed. MHP traffic and motor vehicle regulation includes crash investigation and reporting. Annually, patrol officers drive more than 5.5 million miles, responding to over 70,000 calls for service and issue more than 100,000 warnings and 85,000 citations. During calendar year 2003, MHP officers investigated over 11,000 crashes.

There are a total of 274.55 authorized FTE for MHP operations. MHP personnel include officers, radio technicians, dispatchers, commercial vehicle inspectors, and administrative resources. The Field Forces Bureau, administered by a lieutenant colonel, manages MHP's seven districts, each commanded by a captain. Districts encompass several counties and are subdivided into detachments. The number of detachments in a district varies from three to five. There are a total of 25 detachments located across the state. Sergeants administer detachment activities, including supervision of 5-10 patrol officers assigned to various duty stations.

MHP is funded primarily by Highway State Special Revenue funds. The source of these funds is fuel taxes and gross vehicle weight fees. The MHP budget uses about 11.2 percent of the Special Revenue Account.

MHP Patrol and Non-Patrol Activities

The primary day-to-day activity of an MHP officer is patrol of the Montana highway system. In addition, MHP officers are involved in a variety of duties and responsibilities ranging from inspection of commercial wreckers to public education. Officers also coordinate their activities with other law enforcement agencies by providing mutual aid, both when requested during emergencies and through planned special event activities. An officer can typically determine whether to patrol or conduct non-patrol activity. Patrol routes are often at the officer's discretion.

Sergeants supervise through detachment team meetings, telephone and radio contact, and in many cases email. Officers complete daily activity reports specifying activities completed and associated timeframes. The detachment sergeant reviews this information. Sergeants also review citations issued by officers to evaluate statutory and policy compliance, as well as officer consistency. Sergeants are supposed to conduct quarterly rides with each officer to evaluate patrol performance and interaction with the public.

Technology Improvements

MHP is in the midst of a significant upgrade of reporting and tracking systems used for command and control, patrol officer activity reporting, and crash investigation reporting. One of the most significant changes involves installation of mobile data terminals (MDTs), which are specialized laptop computers attached to the dashboard of patrol vehicles. MDT units have been installed in approximately 1/3rd of MHP's patrol vehicles, primarily in urban areas. MDT units allow officers direct access to state and federal data systems, provide email communication capability, and the terminals can be used to prepare daily as well as crash investigation reports. The purchase of more MDT units and continued installation will be spread over the next several years.

In addition to in-car technological changes, the MHP is centralizing statewide dispatch activity in Helena. Centralization was possible as a result of conversion to a computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system. The CAD system includes capability to incorporate global positioning system patrol vehicle tracking and an activity tracking capability known as the Records Management System. Implementation of this system is estimated for the end of calendar year 2004.

More Patrol Management Focus Needed

There are three major areas where MHP management focus is needed. MHP can look to internal resources and modifications to increase patrol presence.

Patrol Officer Priorities: MHP has established an organizational goal of officers spending at least half their

on-duty time on traffic patrol. For 2003, the MHP reported patrol rate was 43 percent. Our review showed a positive correlation between patrol time and reduction in the number of accidents. We reviewed the daily log for 32 officers for three non-consecutive months in 2002 and 2003 and compiled information on time spent on specific activities. ***We concluded a wide range of obligations impacts time spent on patrol activity.***

We believe MHP officers should focus resources on high-risk, non-discretionary and discretionary activities. It is important for MHP command to identify alternatives for completing low-risk activities such as investigation of non-injury, low-dollar vehicle crashes, ATV and VIN inspections, etc. By focusing on high-risk activities, the amount of time officers spend on traffic patrol should increase. The alternatives for low-risk activities include:

- Reducing the required low-risk activity.
- Concentrating or scheduling activities to reduce the total time expended by officers.
- Contracting or using other resources for completion of the activity, and/or charging a fee.

Patrol Officer Activity Reporting: The current process used to collect and report officer activities could be improved. The three primary deficiencies include:

- Inconsistent activity coding by officers.
- Problematic patrol time definitions.
- Activity information is not used by management to formally analyze MHP activities or to allocate personnel resources

With the planned technological upgrade, the time is right to evaluate operational requirements and collect the type of information useful to supervisors and management. The current annual report issued by MHP could provide an appropriate venue to report operational effectiveness.

Patrol Officer Supervision: Many sergeants spend the majority of their time performing administrative duties rather than on the road for patrol and direct officer supervision. Some sergeants recorded over 90 percent of available time to non-patrol activities each month. According to sergeants, the current supervision approach is paperwork intensive and the amount and type of personal guidance to officers concerning patrol versus non-patrol priorities is minimal. As a result, there are inconsistencies in officer patrol activities in area such as bond collection, use of stationary radar, radio communications, and determinations of minimal speeds for making stops and issuing tickets or warnings.

We believe diverting sergeant time from office administration and paperwork supervision to patrol and on-the-road supervision can increase the MHP presence on Montana's roadways. This could be accomplished by taking advantage of new technologies and re-prioritization of administrative duties.

We recommend MHP implement a pilot project to evaluate a more patrol-oriented approach to supervision. Following the pilot project, MHP should assess administrative requirements to determine what happened to field operations when administrative requirements were delayed or not accomplished at all. The list of options to sergeants being "desk bound", should include using contracts and retired law enforcement officers, and/or establishing criteria for justification for part-time administrative support staff to assume some sergeant tasks.

MHP Officer Pay Is Not Competitive With Applicable External Markets

We reviewed the starting hourly salaries for deputy sheriffs in selected Montana counties and compared them with an MHP officer's starting salary. The information shows, depending on location, an MHP officer who decides to switch to a county agency can make from $1.90 to $5.39 more per hour to start. While not all county law enforcement agencies in Montana pay the higher salaries, typically MHP is not competing with the lower population counties that normally have lower salaries. In addition, our examination shows the majority of MHP turnover occurred from officers located in the eight higher paying counties.

Retention: Why MHP Officers Are Leaving

MHP command conducts employee exit interviews with all officers who leave the agency. Of the 163 officers who left over the past ten years, 55 or 33.7 percent left MHP for pay increases with local law enforcement agencies. Thirty-five of these officers or 43 percent left during the last five years. This trend shows accelerating turnover. ***If the trend continues, MHP would see more than 50 percent of their turnover consisting of officers leaving for local law enforcement agencies within the next four to five years.***

Summary And Conclusion

The data compiled indicates MHP is losing officers to municipal and county law enforcement agencies. Recruitment of law enforcement personnel has also become more competitive in the last decade. Local government officials indicated it is becoming more difficult to recruit qualified applicants, even with the advantage of a more competitive compensation package than MHP. Municipal and county law enforcement agencies cite the need for increasing skills and professionalism in their personnel. These officials support a need to increase initial officer qualifications given the demands of the profession. The same applies to MHP. ***We believe MHP should accurately reflect the increasing complexity of patrol officer duties in the job description, review and revise the recruit qualification criteria, and if necessary request a classification review.***

For a complete copy of the report (03P-09) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to lad@state.mt.us; or check the web site at http://leg.state.mt.us/audit/