



Independent police probe reveals turmoil, dedication

By: Dee Dixon
March, 23, 2009

Results of an independent survey of the Beaumont Police Department released internally late last year revealed a group of people who are dedicated to their profession but are in turmoil because of a lack of trust, accountability and past systemic problems.

"I love my job very much. Thinking about leaving is not something I want. This place has become a home," an officer wrote. "The problems that have been plagued (sic) this place have taken over. The morale is low and no one trust (sic) the person next to them."

The city hired Tennessee-based F&H Solutions Group to perform an employee attitude analysis last year for the Beaumont police and fire department.

Originally, the firm was hired after the bitter contract negotiations between the city and firefighters union.

They were asked to include the police department.

Though the city and police officer's union had quick, civil negotiations, the survey revealed more turmoil behind the scenes.

"(Police) Chief (Frank) Coffin inherited an ineffective department with low morale and a poor reputation," the report said. "Therefore, since Chief Coffin's appointment he has been rebuilding relationships within the Department and gaining trust with the City administration, City Council and the Beaumont community."

Questions addressed how respondents felt about their co-workers, job security, policies, communication, pay and working conditions.

Throughout the 184-page report, there were quite a few references to a "good old boy" system that didn't discipline officers fairly.

"In the past people had legitimate issues that I don't think we dealt with," Coffin said.



Some of the problem is that discipline might not have been meted out but also civil service law mandates that discipline can only be brought within 180 days of offense.

The author of the report, which details specific incidents of alleged misconduct, places the blame for some of the animosity squarely on former chief Tom Scofield.

"(Scofield) did not hold people accountable," the report said.

Coffin was hesitant to talk about his predecessors.

"In the past a decision was made where people didn't have complaints against them investigated and that is no longer the case," he said.

One incident that was mentioned several times with ambiguity and specificity was a disturbance at the police department involving a lieutenant and his wife.

"A lot of people felt like (the lieutenant) should have been fired and from what I heard he should have been fired but it wasn't investigated," said Coffin, who was not chief at the time. "We don't operate that way anymore. If we have a complaint about misconduct we are going to check into it."

Police recommendations, of which there were 20, include revising the organization chart to eliminate some positions, more regularly scheduled meetings between management and their staff, holding poor performing officers accountable and improved face-to-face communication with a new captain over the criminal investigations division.

"There has to be goals, strategies communicated down where everyone knows what are our overall goals," City Manager Kyle Hayes said. "It is imperative that the chief meet with his management team on a regular basis."

Not all of the recommendations will be followed, Coffin said. Some of them violate civil service law and the collective bargaining agreement.

The report recommends making departmental changes that conflict with civil service laws.

The results revealed deep-seated low morale and disdain for those in upper management.

The report said that Capt. Melissa Ownby relies too much on e-mail as a form of communication.



Ownby declined to comment on the report.

The report described an acrimonious relationship between Ownby and Assistant Chief Weldon Dunlap as a "hatred."

"Teamwork at the top of the organization is poor and this negatively affects cooperation and communications throughout the department," the report said.

Dunlap, who was unsettled by the findings of the report - which recommended he retire -- believes that the negative comments about him are from a select number of employees and that it is not endemic.

He said some complaints are from the early 1990s, before he was assistant chief and Coffin was chief.

"We have a great department, a well-respected department. Of course, stuff like this puts a spot on it," Dunlap said. "Since Chief Coffin came in, we've done away with the good ol' boy. You get accused of it more than it is happening. Good ol' boy prevailed for years with different officers. And I guess it always will to some extent."

Dunlap, who said he was unfairly targeted in the report, said complaints against management can be found in any workplace.

"I haven't done anything unethical or immoral, just holding people accountable," Dunlap said.

Coffin said the findings of the survey produced obvious results - subjective information, errors and legitimate concerns.

But some concerns like supervisors not supervising and patrol officers not answering calls were issues that could be substantiated and would be addressed.

For example, the report said some sergeants and patrol officers had "poor performance" because they spent too long on traffic calls and dodged phone calls.

The report said data indicated that some officers handled 25 calls a day while others responded to five.

"We are going to go back and check because everybody needs to do their job," Coffin said.



A theme that seemed to resonate from the survey was a sense of unresolved or unmet expectations.

Several officers described cliques, favoritism and unfair discipline meted out that fostered a difficult environment.

Another wanted everyone to adhere to high standards.

"Let me begin by stating that I am not a (sic) disgruntled or bitter in anyway," wrote the officer who added he or she adhered to high standards. "However, it is due to these standards that I write this with a heavy heart. In general as a whole, the public holds the Police to a higher standard as well."

Coffin said as the department addresses legitimate issues raised by the survey, it should not affect the public.

"The public should not be able to tell any difference in the service they receive," Coffin said. "We are basically talking about internal issues that in some instances will never be resolved. They were issues 30 years ago, they'll be issues 30 years from now."

He said the goals and objectives for the department are to reduce crime, make citizens feel safe and provide a diversified workforce for the community.

"Changes need to pay off for the citizen and not just the convenience of the officer," Coffin said.

Coffin raised questions about whether the report gauged the overall department's morale or that of just disgruntled workers.

"We have people who constantly complain about what happened a long time ago and there is nothing I can do about that except to say it's a different culture now," Coffin said. "And we are going to deal with policy violations no matter how embarrassing for the organization."