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**What Dallas Needs to Do for Its Police**

The department faces serious workforce issues that began long before last week's tragedy. They need to be addressed, and it will be painful.

BY [CHARLES CHIEPPO](http://www.governing.com/authors/Charles-Chieppo.html) | JULY 13, 2016

It's probably impossible for a civilian to fully comprehend what Dallas police officers who saw five brother officers gunned down in a spasm of senseless violence last week are feeling. But that tragedy was the latest blow for a department that, despite the community-policing reforms that have won it accolades, has continued to suffer from serious morale, staffing, compensation and other issues that urgently cry to be addressed.

After 12 years of falling crime rates, violent crime is on the rise in Dallas, as is the time it takes for the Dallas Police Department (DPD) to respond to calls. Morale, on the other hand, is in free fall. In a 2014 Dallas Police Association survey of 1,279 members, 80 percent rated morale either "low" or the "lowest it's ever been." More than a quarter of the respondents said they're looking for jobs elsewhere.

The most immediate problem is that Dallas's salaries aren't competitive. Starting salaries in the suburb of Plano are nearly $20,000 a year higher than in Dallas, and a Plano police officer earns $66,000 after one year. Eight-year DPD veteran Kenneth King was one of eight officers who recently left to join the nearby Fort Worth Police Department. His annual base salary jumped to $62,000 -- about $11,000 more than he was making in Dallas, even with overtime.

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Those eight are hardly alone. DPD lost 240 officers and officers in training during fiscal 2015, the most in a decade. That's a 6.8 percent turnover rate for the approximately 3,500-officer department.

DPD's problems can't simply be blamed on lack of investment. The city spends about 39 percent of its general fund on the police. That's less than Austin, Phoenix and San Antonio, but it's more than Baltimore, Houston, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

Yet the city may not be getting maximum bang for its police buck. For example, the department appears to be top-heavy, with one sergeant for every 5.7 officers, the second-highest ratio among nine similarly sized departments nationwide. The time it takes to respond to calls ranks fourth out of five Texas cities and is rising. Officers also do work often done in other cities by less-expensive civilians.

Then there is the city's Police and Fire Pension System. After years of bad investments and poor management, the fund on a path to go broke by 2040. One reason for the problem is that rather than paying more in salaries, Dallas went down the poison path of enhancing pension benefits to attract and retain officers.

Under [the fund's Deferred Retirement Option Plan](http://www.governing.com/blogs/bfc/col-dallas-police-fire-pension-costly-deferred-retirement-option-plan.html) (DROP), which was created in 1993 and closed to new members last year, police officers and firefighters who have served for at least 20 years can collect a pension even as they continue to work. Instead of going directly into employees' pockets, however, the payments are deposited into separate accounts with guaranteed interest rates of 8-10 percent annually that are paid by the pension system.

The plan is great for public-safety personnel; 283 DROP members have more than $1 million squirreled away, and the average account contains $422,000. But it has cost the city about $325 million and threatened the long-term viability of a system with a $1.4 billion unfunded liability.

As Police Chief David Brown told the *Dallas Morning News*, the fix "is going to hurt everybody." Potential solutions include selling pension obligation bonds that would put the city on the hook for part of the unfunded liability, requiring a larger public subsidy, and/or forcing workers to contribute more. The latter, of course, would exacerbate the department's salary problem.

Getting DPD on track will require the city, perhaps with state help, to make the tough decisions needed to achieve a sustainable public-safety pension system. The city must also raise police salaries -- particularly if the pension fix requires officers to pay more -- and try to offset part of the higher cost by taking advantage of opportunities to make the department more efficient.

These problems aren't unique to Dallas or to public safety, of course. Countless governments keep their employees' salaries low to help balance budgets and make up for it with pension promises. The problem is that when the bill arrives, it's far bigger than if it had been paid via higher salaries. In the end, that's not just a bad deal for the public servants who put their lives on the line for us. It's a bad deal for everybody.

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