

Recruitment and Retention Strategies from Rapid City

Voiceover

00:01

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello, and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. As most of our listeners are aware the United States Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services focuses on the nationwide advancement of community policing. Community policing cannot occur without a dedicated staff of law enforcement officers. Recruiting and retaining those high-quality officers though has been a struggle for departments across the United States over the past few years.

The Rapid City Police Department in South Dakota was one of those agencies and focus on the word "was". Things turned around in 2023 for them through a holistic approach that does not focus on just a single issue but instead addresses a wide variety of factors. Today, our guests are Assistant Chief Scott Sitts and Research and Development Specialist Dave Kinser from the Rapid City Police Department. Assistant Chief Sitts and Mr. Kinser, welcome to *The Beat*.

Assistant Chief Scott Sitts

01:11

Thank you for having us.

Dave Kinser

01:11

Yeah. I appreciate it.

Donelan

01:13

So I don't want to break with tradition and I want to get to the subject that we're going to be talking about and I always tell folks, "I'm so excited that we're talking about this," but I truly do mean it. We're bringing news you can use to law enforcement leadership and officers across the United States and this is a topic that I know so many are focused on right now. But before we dive into that, I always like to ask the same question which is how did you get into law enforcement? So if you could just briefly each tell me. Dave, actually, I'll start with you. You're a civilian in a police department, how did you get involved in law enforcement?

Kinser

01:44

So I joined the Marines out of high school. And then I was working overseas for federal law enforcement with the State Department and I got stuck in Iraq for like four years and was trying to move home and the Rapid City Police Department kind of saved me from that situation and brought me in and it's been great ever since.

Donelan

02:01

Excellent. I can't wait to hear how your military experience parlayed into your experience at the police department. Thank you. Assistant Chief Sitts, how did you get involved? What was the draw to law enforcement for you in the first place?

Sitts

02:12

I grew up in a first responder family. And so, I've been around law enforcement in my entire life. It's the only thing I've ever wanted to do or could think about doing. Got out of high school, again, I also joined the Marine Corps, and when I got out of the Marine Corps, I started going to college. And when I was going to college, I got hired on by a local Sheriff's Office. So I been doing this now for a little bit over 25 years.

Donelan

02:32

Excellent. Well, thank you both for your service to our country. All right. Let's dive in. Let's tell everyone about the Rapid City Police Department. I want to talk about the past. And then, we're going to move into the present and how you arrived at your situation now. So tell us about the Rapid City Police Department and some of the issues that your agency has faced over the last few years specifically when it comes to recruitment and retention. What kind of shortages were you dealing with?

Sitts

02:57

Yeah. So I would say, you know, 2012 up through 2019, we were pretty typical. Our average attrition rate was around that 6 percent to 7 percent. After 2019 like a lot of law enforcement agencies we started seeing those that were eligible for retirement, they were definitely out the door, those that could take an early retirement, they were out the door.

And then, we just really had a large turnover with our senior officers and even sergeants that we haven't seen before seeking different professions, different careers completely outside of law enforcement. And our attrition rate kind of soared the last couple of years where we were averaging right around 14 percent, which I think is pretty consistent throughout law enforcement right now in the nation that 14 percent to 20 percent.

And we are really struggling to keep staff, to bring in good people. We noticed that our application pool really dropped off before we were getting each hiring cycle, you know, 100 to 150 applicants. We were down to averaging about 20, 25 applicants and really struggling to fill our manpower needs.

Donelan

03:56

Let me ask you, in terms of why they were leaving, can you pinpoint that? Was that because of just the general sentiment towards law enforcement? Was there experiences that they were having in the field in Rapid City? Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Sitts

04:10

Yeah. You bet. I think it's all the above. I think the social climate towards law enforcement definitely played a huge role. I think over the past if we look back at statistics, our communities have become more violent, assaults on officers have increased, and also our workload has increased dramatically where burnout has become a major, major factor. Our officers here at the Rapid City Police Department are very busy. They're averaging per officer on patrol right around that 1,500 calls for service a year. So it's non-stop for our department. So I think there are several key factors that played into that high turnover rate.

Kinser

04:45

Yeah. And just to add to what Scott said, I mean we've kind of took a very outward-looking-in approach to kind of officer burnout and fatigue and kind of ran some numbers and had some surveys and found that like 65 percent of our calls were going towards the homeless problem, right? And on all our surveys they, you know, cops said, "Hey, we want to be cops and we're kind of chasing these continued cycles that are never closing and there's never resolution. We're dealing with the same people day in and day out."

Donelan

05:15

So you ran those surveys with the force that you had sort of left after the, you know, I want to call it the Great Escape, but after those officers who were eligible and could retire retired. So those were surveys with your force at the time?

Kinser

05:28

Yeah. Both with the force at the time, right. Doing a department-wide survey, but then also doing exit interviews with every single officer that was leaving and having unabashed and unfiltered conversations where you say, "Hey, what happened?" Right? And you got to open yourself up to criticism if you're willing to have that.

Donelan

05:46

Right. Exactly. Let's set the stage a little bit about policing in Rapid City, South Dakota, to begin with. How busy is the department? Where do you sort of stand statewide?

Sitts

05:57

We lead the state in overall... Well, I'm not going to say lead the state. We're tied kind of with Sioux Falls, which has triple the population of us here in Rapid City for calls for service. 2022, 2021, we led the state in homicides and our officers run. When we bring in new hires, we want to be upfront with them and this is not a department where you're going to be looking for calls for service or looking for something to do. It's literally call to call with calls holding and call stacked.

Donelan

06:24

So describe for me then what's the sort of makeup in Rapid City? Is it primarily suburban? Do you have urban centers? What is driving that extremely busy calls for service?

Sitts

06:36

I think what we have here is, is Rapid City is kind of the hub of the west side of South Dakota. We have a lot of communities around this, but anyone that comes here in this area is going to come to Rapid City for entertainment, they come to Rapid City for shopping. I think another key factor is, is we have the poorest Native American reservation about 45 miles away from us. So we have a lot of visitors from the reservation up here too, so while our population is right around that 80,000 mark, on any given day you can probably add 30,000 to 40,000 just from the surrounding communities.

Donelan

07:06

Thank you. That paints the picture. Chief, we've talked about rank and file, what was the sentiment among command staff? What were those conversations like in 2021, 2022 as you sort of saw the department struggling with the recruitment and retention?

Sitts

07:20

Yeah. Those conversations, you know, to go back to our attrition rate a little bit and I failed to mention this, but law enforcement is a difficult job and it takes a special individual to be committed and to go to work day in and day out and we all know the struggles with seeing things that no person should ever have to see and really that toll that it takes on your own wellness, it takes on your family. So we wanted to look at this as a package, if everything that kind of impacts our retention that our health, wellness and safety of our officers and our staff and how do we really address this together.

Donelan

07:52

It was a team approach?

Sitts

07:53

Absolutely. You know, not only a team approach but I would say also a city approach when we're talking about the stuff we were able to implement. We have a very supportive city council. We have a very supportive mayor and we have a very supportive community overall here of law enforcement. So really, this was a team conversation within our rank and file, within our command staff. And then, also with our other city leadership.

Donelan

08:14

You can do all you want to do, your command staff can do all you want to do, but if you don't have that buy-in from city leadership, from the community, that becomes a difficult if not impossible thing to do. So thank you for bringing that up. I want to get into how you got there but I want to first start off with, for our listeners, things turned around in 2023. So where does the department stand now in terms of staffing? Where is morale? And then, we'll get to how you got there, but where are we right now?

Sitts

08:41

So right now, today, we entered the year looking for 35 sworn police officers, and right now we're currently only have eight openings and that is including the eight employees we've lost this year. So if we didn't lose any this year, we would have been full staff.

Donelan

08:55

Compared to, just to paint the picture in terms of like you're at full staff now, what was sort of your worst situation there in terms of staffing?

Kinser

09:05

At one point I think we were at, what? 34 down at the highest, 34, 35.

Donelan

09:11

So you were 34, 35 officers down say around what?

Sitts

09:14

Beginning of this year.

Donelan

09:15

Oh, beginning of this year you were down—

Sitts

09:17

Beginning this year.

Donelan

09:18

And now you're only down eight?

Sitts

09:19

Eight, and our attrition rate when I compare January through October of 2022 to January of October of 2023, our attrition rate has dropped by 55.56 percent.

Donelan

09:32

Yeah. I can hear jaws dropping. How did we get there? Let's talk about that. We're going to spend some time talking about that. So you use some traditional methods such as increasing pay and better access to time off, but you went further than that. So just A to Z, what was the recipe?

Sitts

09:49

Yeah. The recipe was surveys, the recipe was research. I spent the summer of 2022 at the FBI National Academy and I was able to talk to a lot of different agencies, really invested a lot of my time there in taking their wellness courses and just learning about the different wellness options, what's available, what some other departments are doing. And visiting with those agencies and kind of bringing back what other departments are doing, and then digging into what our employees want. Because what I think is great, what I want may not be what our employees want. So really determining what those employees want, what's important to them. And then, seeing what we can bring to the table and what we can implement.

Donelan

10:28

All right. And Dave, what did you bring to the table?

Kinser

10:31

Well, so like I said, we were really crunching numbers looking at the tangible and intangibles, right? Especially when you're talking from an HR perspective, law enforcement being one of the toughest jobs in the world because you're balancing what customer service, public safety, and that morale and welfare

issues, right? So I mean we took a real intentional look through the surveys, crunch the numbers on there, found out like, you know, because often times rumors start in the basement, right? And that's where the sentiment comes from is the people on the ground, right? So diagnosing what they were having issues with and saying, "Wow. 60 percent of our calls are related to this chronic homelessness issue in Rapid City, right? And crisis and co-occurring substance abuse." So we said, "Well, what are we doing there? How can we look to fix that?" And honestly, we've been working with IACP, International Association of Chiefs of Police, and COPS, intentionally for years to develop kind of proactive outreach units with our Quality of Life Unit who was embedded in our care campus, which is our diversionary.

And then, kind of working on some of our high utilizers. We looked at our top 10 high utilizers, our number one had I believe it was 355 contacts with fire and EMS in one year and we ran the numbers and that was \$120,000 to Rapid City and the county. So we kind of put it up as a business proposal, like how can we do better? But you talk about the political capital, right? Somebody that is costing that much, that's two full-time officer salaries.

So we looked at kind of that, working with our partners in our Quality of Life Unit, and helping to get these high utilizers out of jail into treatment and a lot of them were, again, fully employed and that was one of our first approaches is kind of cracking down on some of our biggest issues there.

Donelan

12:18

Your highest utilizer had 355 contacts in one year. That's almost once a day.

Kinser

12:24

Yeah. And I mean if you look even further, right? I mean we calculated the total number of jail time that guy had had in the last 10 years, either served or in lieu of, and then on probation, and, you know, exceeded the actual time limit that he was alive during those 10 years, right? So I mean he had like 15 years of stacked up jail time or something egregious. The officers see that, they know that, right?

Donelan

12:49

And that doesn't help him. It's obviously not helping him, it's not working. It's not working for the officers. It's not working for the community so for perspective, how much time did you have to invest, right? Time, energy, did you have to invest to get to that breaking down the numbers? How did you break down those numbers? Because I'm sure there are some who are listening saying, "You know what? We need to do the same." So how did you do that?

Kinser

13:11

I mean working with a record staff, and then also the court system, right? And other partners. So we've kind of got a unique partnership here in Rapid City that is easy that we probably take for granted that a

lot of people don't, is we share a joint building with our Sheriff's Office, have integrated records, command staffs, patrols in the basement, their patrol is on the first floor, and the county runs diversion programs, care campus, crisis, resources, 24/7 safe bed solutions.

So we embedded our Quality of Life Unit, two officers, and two civilians, social workers, at that care campus where that they were meeting with our quality of life high utilizers, we call them, and those individuals were tagged in all of our systems with a queue so that officers knew that they were dealing with a quality of life candidate. And then, also if those individuals were going to the care campus for detox, right? They were meeting with the Quality of Life Unit before they got released.

So I mean it was very intentional but then also this collaborative approach to working on these high utilizers, right? Because eventually that constant communication, you're going to be able to make some kind of difference and say, "Hey, how does it work?" But then I mean we also empowered these two officers to work with the court system to talk to judges, to talk to prosecutors, to talk to public defenders and, you know, they've actually negotiated treatment options where these people were given the option to go to treatment and get out of jail early. And some of these people had life-changing transformations. I mean, but selfishly, we don't have 300 calls for service a year and you start taking those down and that adds up.

Donelan

14:53

Absolutely. Okay. Let me stop right here and revisit the Quality of Life Unit. You've mentioned that several times. What is the Quality of Life Unit?

Kinser

15:01

So that is two officers who are plain clothed just work with our homeless population and they're co-located with our crisis services and our homeless services and our detox facility and the health and human service counselors. The IACP actually helped us start that unit through a grant called the Collective Healing Initiative and that was kind of where we kind of developed a lot of our proactive programming to where we are now, because we thought we wanted to focus on our most vulnerable, and then also our highest utilizers, right? And then, kind of work towards, well, how do we prevent this? And then, how do we actually operationalize this in the community?

Donelan

15:43

That's amazing. And you utilized grant funding to your benefit in several different ways. So you just mentioned the grant through IACP, but you also utilized I understand a Department of Justice COPS grant, correct?

Kinser

15:59

Yes. We've used a lot of COPS grants and are very appreciative to them.

Donelan

16:04

What is the grant that you partnered with Fire Department?

Kinser

16:06

That is the COPS CIT grant, the microgrant.

Donelan

16:11

What is the COPS CIT grant stand for?

Kinser

16:13

The Crisis Intervention Training grant. It's about collaborative co-response and crisis solutions.

Donelan

16:19

How did you set that up with your Fire Department?

Kinser

16:20

We bullied them a little bit. No. I'm joking, but, no, we said, "Hey..." We talked about our high utilizers once again, right? And said, "What are your numbers?" And then they ran the numbers, right? So we're trying to get political and social support for this and I believe that they were having 1.5 million in unbilled EMS services a year. So I mean that's like 30 officers or firefighters right there, right?

So we kind of took the business approach to all this, right? And the practical because people care about funding, right? And if you're trying to get new programs funded they cost money, but where's that money coming from? So through that IACP Collective Healing Grant, we knew we wanted street outreach and different programs that are actually, you know, once again working on our officer fatigue and burnout, right? Because if officers aren't having respond to those low-level calls, they're not having that fatigue and all that stuff associated to those reoccurring calls that they didn't like and were not obviously best responded to by a police officer. And Fire jumped on board. You know, always had a great relationship besides the jokes, you know, back and forth.

Donelan

17:23

Yeah.

Kinser

17:23

So I actually applied with a fire science degree here so that was kind of embarrassing.

Donelan

17:28

[Laughs] I can hear it all. So you utilize grants, 60 percent of your calls were in response to basically the homelessness crisis and working with those high utilizers, identifying them, getting them the help that they actually need, you mentioned that there were some transformational stories among those high utilizers. Can you tell us about one of them?

Kinser

17:46

Yeah. I can sanitize it out. So like I said one of those high utilizers had a brother who used up as much resources as he did and the Quality of Life Unit, actually got him out of jail and into treatment and I believe he was sober and clean and employed for 12 months before he moved out of the community. And I mean that was huge because everybody knew his name, right? Every fire, EMS, police officer, social worker in the health field and able to share that, right?

And that was part of our successes. Officers were really skeptical about us taking two of their numbers and turning them into a Homeless Outreach Unit, right? So I mean it was all about not only sharing those internally but externally. And then saying, "Hey, what are the next steps?" Well, you know, like I talked about that business perspective and that was just a part of it.

I mean fast-forward now, we're partnered with Journey On, which is a community organization that we help to set up to respond to low level calls for service and help us with our co-occurring crisis and substance abuse. They, I believe now have 10 outreach workers, supervisors, and they're handling, I think they handled 10,000 calls the first year they were in operation.

So I mean that was kind of from there to now and I mean I could talk about this all day, but I don't want to keep my soap box out, because I think a lot of our other recruitment stuff is kind of what pay dividends.

Donelan

19:13

And we're going to get to that and I promise you, I think that there are people who could listen to you all day, because they are grappling with the same issues on their home front. So it sounds like to me, you stopped accepting the status quo. It's no longer, "Well, it is what it is. We've got 60 percent homelessness calls." And you got creative, and then you found the funding, and you got that buy-in. I don't mean to oversimplify it, but if there's a will there's a way it sounds like?

Kinser

19:36

Yeah. I mean and I think a lot of it just boiled down to like the chiefs putting in the time explaining stuff with not only the troops, but the community and the community leadership over at council and the

Mayor's Office. It really helped our mayor was the prior chief of police so he really understood the issues and embraced the community policing aspects and was a big champion of going after and doing these proactive solutions.

Donelan

20:03

Thanks, Dave. So that obviously helps with morale for your existing officers in terms of the calls that they're running. In terms of attracting and keeping, but attracting new candidates and keeping officers who you have in your rank and file, talk to me about the better pay and the time off because that's not just we're going to get more money. You got real about attacking those particular concerns that officers had raised.

Sitts

20:27

Yeah. Absolutely. And I think it's important to note it has to be a command philosophy. We have a saying around here that you have to be able to take care of yourself before you can take care of others and that's physically, mentally, and financially. If an officer is not in the right frame of mind, we can't expect them to go out and care for our community because when they have other problems on their plate, they're not going to provide that level of customer service that our citizens need.

And I think when we have officers not out there in the right frame of mind, again, whether that's physically, mentally, financially, they're going to make mistakes and that's when our profession ends up on the front page of the news and we have protests. So we start with that philosophy and we really looked at what we are doing in some of the practices.

And since then, we've given our sergeants permission and if an officer is not in the right frame of mind to be out serving our public, they have permission to send them home and paid and let them do what they need to do. And then, come back when you're ready and you're in the right frame of mind to serve our community. So I think with that philosophy, we really started looking at what can we offer our employees that coincides with this model that you have to be able to take care of yourself. So we really focus a lot of our incentives on financial wellness, physical wellness, and emotional and mental wellness.

Donelan

21:35

Let's start off with the first one you mentioned, financial wellness and that time off. What did you do there?

Sitts

21:40

We did a study what other officers, other departments are making and we were able to justify this by our call for service volume, being that we are one of the highest call for service departments here, basically, in the Midwest region. So we looked at that, looked at what others are making and we were able to make a pretty good argument that our officers needed to be paid as such.

So, back in 2020, we were starting off at 22.82, and since then we've increased our wages to a little over 32 percent and our officers are now starting off at 30.17 and we're committed to staying one of the highest paid agencies in the state of South Dakota.

Donelan

22:14

Excellent. And then, the time off. There are those who are like, "Hey, listen, I don't want overtime. I need to take a minute. I've got to take a knee." What did you do there with the personal time off?

Sitts

22:24

Yeah. That's generational preferences. The generation that we're hiring now is very interested in the time off, that the time spent with their family and friends and doing hobbies and not like when I came to work, you can throw me all the overtime you want, I'm going to eat it up, but times have changed. Time off ranked very, very high in our employee surveys, and so we looked at that.

And one of the issues we notice when we hire new employees, they start off with a zero sick leave balance or a zero vacation balance and what happens if you have that family emergency or you need to take some days off, they don't have that balance there. So we implemented right off the bat, we're going to give you 40 hours of vacation, and we're going to give you three days of sick leave, day one through the door, to kind of take off that stress of not being able to take some time off.

What we were seeing is if employee had a family emergency or medical emergency, really what it was is all the other employees in the department would donate vacation and donate time to them. So we just adjusted that and make sure they have that peace of mind that they do have some time off and some vacation right away. So that was one thing we did, add some more time, and another thing we did is we increased the rate of what you, your accrual vacation.

So prior to you had to be at the Rapid City Police Department or with the city here for 13 years, and once you hit that 13-year mark, you start earning four weeks of vacation a year. So what we did was we bumped all that down. So now you max out your vacation accrual at seven years and there was three steps before you max out. So we bumped all that down, we cut it down, so our employees are earning more vacation a lot sooner.

Donelan

23:52

80 hours of sabbatical leave at year three?

Sitts

23:54

Yes. We did implement sabbatical leave. If you would have asked me five years ago about sabbatical leave, I probably would have laughed you out of the room, but, yeah. We've implemented sabbatical leave. So we know that the first three years in law enforcement, you're drinking out a fire hose. You're

going through a lot of training, it's a lot to take in, and really that first three years, you need a break. So we're going to give you that break. We're going to give you 80 hours of sabbatical leave. It's not going to come out of your vacation balances. And then, we're going to give that to you again every four years after that.

Donelan

24:23

That is huge. Previously unheard of, now I can see where people want to sign up with you. You have one quarterly paid wellness day, talk about that. What is that?

Sitts

24:33

Yeah. So each quarter an employee can take a wellness day. This is not a free day off where you can sit at home, we are going to ask that you do a wellness activity and we've contracted with several local providers you can go in for, you know, if it's deep float cryo, massage therapy, red light therapy, several different types of therapies. You can go in there, you can spend an hour doing that therapy, you don't need to take a vacation day. The city's going to pay. We pay for that activity. And then, you can have the rest of the day to focus on yourself.

Kinser

25:02

One thing to add to that, so this is not just the day, this is taken off your schedule. So this is one of your normal scheduled shifts so you replace one of your days you're going to be working with this, and the only requirement is you have a one-hour meeting with the peer support team and talk about wellness and health.

Donelan

25:21

And in real world scenarios in many departments, you have to come in on your off time to do activities like this. Giving them the time during their shift, that seems pretty key to me.

Sitts

25:33

I agree. Again, it helps prevent that burnout. And again, one of those therapy sessions is meant for your physical or mental wellness and it's been met with a huge success. You know, we were worried about... It's a fine balance, because at the time when we implemented this, we're struggling with numbers already, but if we don't implement this we're going to continue to struggle with numbers in the future. So we kind of have to suck it up when people are off on their sabbaticals or off on their wellness days with those low shift numbers and may offer those overtime to fill that shift until we get caught up.

Donelan

26:01

I just was about to ask you. Like how can you stand having... You know, because that's a lot of hours added up when you start talking about your full force and people having access to those opportunities, how has it been? You've been using overtime, are you managing?

Sitts

26:13

We are managing. And again, at the beginning it might have been a little bit tricky, our sergeants, and our supervisor did a great job balancing the schedule. It have the least amount of impact, but as our hiring increase—and I forgot to mention that—our hiring comparison from 2022 to 2023, we're up 87.5 percent. So getting these extra bodies in, getting these extra individuals trained and getting them out on the street, it definitely has lessened that burden. And right now our sergeants, we just polled our sergeants and interviewed them about wellness days and sabbatical leaves and our sergeants are all on board and want the program to continue.

Donelan

26:46

That's amazing. And I'm glad to hear that you sort of walk the walk and you managed through the beginning of it and it seems to me that things have settled a bit. That's great news for those who might be thinking about implementing some of these initiatives. Not to downplay them, but you also have a 250 student loan repayment monthly and no co-pay for therapy and counseling?

Sitts

27:07

Correct. Yes. Again, important to us where we're talking about that physical and mental wellness. So we have some great benefits already through the city. Right now therapy is 100 percent covered, except for the co-pay part and we have a \$30 co-pay. So we're going to take care of that \$30 co-pay. If people need to talk to someone, we encourage that. We're trying to erase that stigma, and it's also been a great benefit and it's been taken advantage of probably more than we would have guessed initially.

Kinser

27:34

I just wanted to put a cautionary tale out there when people are implementing all these things, right? And a lot of the effort and intentions goes towards attracting new candidates, right? But you got to take care of the people that have stuck with you and are still here, right? So I mean if you don't retroactively give people sabbaticals that have put in the time and effort and only focus on the new hires, you're definitely going to have unintended consequences with these types of programming.

Sitts

28:00

And I'll piggyback on that, that was one thing we contemplated was a hiring bonus, but I was really dead set not to have a hiring bonus. I think we have to reward those employees that have been here, those employees that stuck it out. And so, instead of a hiring bonus, we give employees a \$3,000 recruitment bonus if they referred an individual that gets hired on at the police department.

Donelan

28:21

That's creative and I have not heard of that before. Thank you for bringing that to light. So you have all these amazing tools now at your disposal to help the officers who you currently have employed and to attract new candidates. Let's talk about that hiring process. You just gave us a figure between 2022 and 2023 in terms of your hiring, how has that landscape shifted for you?

Sitts

28:43

Well, thanks to the COPS Grant, we were able to hire a recruiter, a professional recruiter who has done an absolutely amazing job with our social media. We've partnered with a marketer here in town and really have hit the internet and she has done an absolute fabulous job in getting new bodies in here and we've turned over a lot of our hiring process to her, which has freed up supervisors and other officers from doing the hiring in the past.

So out traditional, going to job fairs at colleges, doing all that advertisement and, but again, I think a lot of this circles back, and if I look at a lot of the classes we've hired here this year, our staff is our best recruiter. Our employees getting word out, our employees talking positive about the Rapid City Police Department, telling their friends, telling their family, they are our best recruiters and we've paid a lot of \$3,000 recruitment bonuses this year.

Donelan

29:36

That's awesome. You got me thinking here. South Dakota might be cold but I can handle it. In terms of the type of candidate you're going after, has that changed as well? And if so, how are you reaching them?

Kinser

29:48

Yeah. I can talk to this a little bit. So I wanted to kind of circle back to like the recruitment process itself, right? So back in the day, we were getting 150 applications, right? And that dramatically shifted to about 30 where you were actually telling people you're on a list for the next year, we might call you, right? Now we're in a super hyperactive and competitive market, and one of the big things too is we were having a training sergeant doing all our recruitment and balancing our training load.

So I mean you were losing that institutional knowledge every three years when that person got promoted or retired or moved on, right? So that was kind of the focus why we turned to the COPS Grant to say, "Hey, look, we are looking at..." Not a lot of agencies that have a full-time recruiter at our size, which is I think we're at like 140 sworn right now.

We said, "Hey, we really need to professionalize this and also we're looking at doing some different things for our recruiting campaign specifically looking after, going after our military veterans." I believe we're over 60 percent veteran staff, something high like that. And a lot of those candidates are pretty resilient from their time in the military, have more life experience and more, you know, they're a little bit older than your traditional college candidate.

Our design was to go after that military SkillBridge program, and if departments aren't using that, they should. Basically, in a nutshell real quick is that program, you find somebody that's transitioning out of the military, it allows that military member to come be duty assigned while they're still in the military to you as an unpaid intern. So the military pays their pay and benefits for six months, while you're putting them through the academy in that PTO phase.

And that's usually when people say, "Hey, I want to be a cop or I don't," right? And so, as a department, we were spending like 50 grand to train people, and if you can get that military SkillBridge program active, the military still pays them their pay and benefits and you're just training them to be an officer. And when they get out of that military diamond service, you just offer them a job. And then, they come onto your payroll at that time. I mean that's a really cool program.

Donelan

31:51

That is so cool. You are training officers on someone else's dime, getting them exposed during that time when you can lose officers so you're getting them exposed. They can make that decision as to whether or not this is the career for them. And then, by the time they come out, not only have they been trained on someone else's dime but they've also had that time to digest what it really means to be a police officer, and they come in confident, if they say, "Yes. This is what I want to do," or they walk away from it. And that sounds amazing.

Kinser

32:21

Yeah. And like I said, we wouldn't have been able to run with a program the way we have in our recruitment program if we didn't propose an innovative idea to COPS to say, "Hey, look, we want to try a different recruiting strategy. We're a mid-level, small agency in rural South Dakota, we want to try and target this surrounding six states, look at the military installations and also these technical schools."

And really intentionally focusing on that, right? Especially those schools that have academies, so we're getting reciprocity eligible officers that were not having to put through the academy, right? And that's three months of training where you're going to house and pay for somebody. So I mean there was a lot

of really intentional design behind our outreach and recruitment and focusing on our target areas, these vocational and colleges with law enforcement programs that specifically do reciprocity eligible hiring.

Sitts

33:12

I'll just say in addition, you know, I think all departments would appreciate the diversity of their department to mimic the diversity of their community. So we've launched an Empower Her campaign to attract female candidates and we've also been to and visited a few times some united tribal technical colleges, again, to promote diversity within the police department.

Donelan

33:31

It's been proven that if your department reflects a community, you're going to have a more effective policing that community. So that's phenomenal. Virtually every single law enforcement agency in America is trying to recruit officers. And so, it's extremely competitive. I mean when you've got South Dakota, and then you've got police departments in Florida who they're like, "Hey, come enjoy the sun and the beach." Has it been that focus on going after these military members, like what has set Rapid City apart from the rest?

Sitts

33:59

Yeah. I think if you've ever been to Rapid City, we're at the heart of the Black Hills here in South Dakota. It's a beautiful area. A lot of the people and candidates we attract are into the outdoors and hiking and hunting and fishing and we've been getting a lot of applicants from the East Coast and the West Coast that come to the area and fall in love.

We are 16 miles from Mount Rushmore so it's a large tourist area during the summer and a lot of our applicants that will come back and say, "I was here for the summer. I fell in love with the area. I want to come back." Obviously, they weren't here during the winter, but the winters aren't too bad so—

Donelan

34:31

I've been there during the winter.

Sitts

34:34

You get used to it.

Donelan

34:34

I think I cried one day. I was so cold. [Laughs]

Sitts

34:38

So, yeah. I think we're just kind of unique in that area. A lot of South Dakota when you get across the river or you start heading east of us, it's real flat and it's farmland, but that's not the area where we are at. And again, it's a great area. Five and a half hours from Denver, Minneapolis isn't too bad for a drive. So we're rural but we're in a great location for that kind of lifestyle that we're a little bit more laid-back lifestyle with hunting and fishing and tourism being our main attractions.

Donelan

35:03

I'm packing my bags now. And my snowsuit just so you know. Before we let you go, before we close. Looking back on... I mean there's just so much that you've done, right? It's almost hard to digest, but looking back on trials and tribulations and the journey, if there was anything that you would look back on and say, "Hey, you know what? I could save people a lot of pain now that I know what I know." Are there any lessons learned that you think are valuable for our listeners?

Sitts

35:29

I think one of the biggest lessons learned is this package we have forward is not what we initially designed or what we had presented, so to save yourself a lot of time if you're looking at implementing this stuff, and I hear a lot of, "Well, we can't do that because of the government red tape." My biggest set of advice would be to get with your city leadership, include city council president, and that finance director, the HR director, and the city attorney in on those initial meetings and you can really figure out what you can do and what you can't do.

And a lot of the stuff when we're talking about increasing the time off, or sabbatical leave, that really doesn't cost anything out of our budget. Those were easy wins for us, so get that city leadership on board, do the research, define the need, and the cost savings, because really, if I can just hit that real quick. So right now, if I'd had to replace 12 officers this year, if I'm just talking salary alone and benefits, not training, it's going to cost me somewhere between \$652,000 to \$870,000 just to pay those officers their salary until they can work independently. And that's not including all the cost of training and everything like that. So we've projected this year, another benefit we offered is a longevity bonus.

So after a longevity bonus payout, the first nine months of this wellness package is going to cost approximately \$493,000. If I had to replace those 12 officers, I'm still saving nearly \$300,000 and you can't even put a price tag on the productivity, and then the efficiency and the institutional knowledge that walks out that door, right? We know that with experienced officers, we generate less use of force, right? We generate less complaints. There's less complaints to investigate, there's less use of force, which equals less lawsuits. So keeping these experienced individuals inside of our department and serving our community, that \$300,000 is nothing compared to everything else those experienced people bring.

Donelan

37:18

Dave, any lessons learned for you?

Kinser

37:20

Yeah. I mean I think everything boils down to, in government, right, your political and social capital, right? I mean every program we do, we have it lined out, like here's our expectations, here's what we think is going to happen, but I mean also like from the high utilizers to the different like longevity bonuses and that, have the numbers, have them ready, involve that leadership like the chief said. I wish we had Chief Hedrick on here to talk about how many hours and hours and hours he politicked all of this, really the champion behind the scenes and meeting with the council members and the mayor and the finance director and HR to get all this pushed through. But everything we did, I mean Scott and I probably wrote a 100 different memos and backed it all up with research and I mean just come correct and have your stuff ready and show the real tangible value in these programs, because like he was talking about, if you would have brought up sabbatical leave 10 years ago, everybody would have just snickered at it.

But I mean we were working with the COPS Office and IACP and we're looking into sabbatical and the only place I could find it was this small, I think 10-person agency in Wisconsin. I called the chief, had a real great conversation with him, and said, "Hey, can I get your policy and any documents you got?" And said, "You know, what's really stopping us from doing this?" We had that conversation. Sure shifts are going to be low but, it's just making that investment.

Now that we're all through the first phase of sabbatical, it's super easy because it's just for those first three years. And then, it's cumulative every four years after that throughout their career.

Sitts

38:54

And to piggyback on that, I think you might find this a little eye-opening also, but doing that research and visiting with city leadership and visiting with city council prior to, when this went to council, when this whole wellness package went to council for approval, it went on consent with no questions. We were prepared to give a presentation on why this is needed, no questions asked on consent and it was amazing. Not only that, we probably had 30 officers that attended that city council meeting, so those officers like with their presence, made it known that this is important to them.

And what I'm not talking about here is also how our morale has increased, which I think you can see through the 55 percent decrease in attrition.

Donelan

39:34

And that's the most important thing, right? It's how are your officers feeling? I mean they are going out there and putting their lives on the line and I know we say that all the time, but facts are facts and that

takes a lot out of a human being day in day out, seeing the things that they see, the pressure that they're up against day in day out, and to be able to actually do something about that, put the recruitment and retention aside, just to be able to do that for your officers is massive.

Two of the things that struck me most about your journey: A, it's just changing your thinking, it sounds like. It's that laughing off sabbatical leave and accepting it as a real possible option for you. It's getting creative and breaking the mold and doing things that you've never done before that might feel uncomfortable at first seems like to me, and you guys can say, "No. That's not what it was." But it just sounds like a lot of it is just the mental game. You got to just break free of past and get creative about the future.

Kinser

40:26

Yeah. Absolutely. I think it's a different world than 10 years ago. I mean trying to get overtime shifts staffed this day and age is really hard because this generation of officers wants to use their time off.

Donelan

40:39

Yeah. They do. And I think the pandemic too had a lot to play with that, right? We all know time is limited, but wow, that really I think shook a lot of people and it re-engaged folks on what's really important in life, et cetera. So I'm not surprised to see that generational change of people wanting that time off versus money in their wallet.

The other thing that you've talked about so much throughout this time with us is the research and stats. And correct me if I'm wrong, it doesn't sound like you can downplay that at all. I mean you had the information to back up what you wanted to do and just like you described that one council, I mean you didn't even have to make the presentation. There was no real arguments there. You had the data, you backed it up, and change happened.

Sitts

41:17

Yeah. Absolutely. I think that was definitely key and I think it's important for us in law enforcement to remember is we're competing with private organizations and private businesses. So this is the stuff that these private organizations and businesses are doing and this is what we're competing with. So we have to adapt to the times, we have to adapt to the new generational preferences and expectations.

And again, that was one of the common trends that we noticed in 2020 throughout 2022 was people were completely leaving the profession of law enforcement and going into these private organizations that do offer these benefits. So if we're going to remain competitive and we're going to attract quality employees, these are the type of efforts that we're going to have to make and we're going to have to stay proactive moving forward. We can't call this good enough, we got to continue to constantly evaluate and be prepared to adjust and remain competitive.

Kinser

42:01

Yeah. I think one thing too, that we kind of didn't really go in depth about was our peer support team and the design of that.

Donelan

42:08

Tell us more.

Kinser

42:10

Our peer support team really took off in 20—I believe it was like 2017, 2018—where we took an intentional look at how we're doing our critical incident stress debriefings and our overall just wellness and concern in our patrol and with our officers, because they see a lot of stuff, that cumulative trauma, that compassion fatigue, and like the assistant chief was talking about, if you're not in that right mindset, you can't go out there and really help out anybody else.

So we took a look at our peer support team, part of that collective healing initiative was officer wellness and resiliency and we took the initial steps. Got a 12-person peer support team trained. The assistant chief was on that team, we had commanders, we had some line-level supervisors, but most importantly we had the informal peer leaders, right? Because they set the culture and really know the pulse of the agency. But I mean that intentional design from every element of the department and civilian staff, taking care of our people and pulling people aside, having those conversations like, "Hey..." You know, but then working with them now, just having supervisors with the ability to say, "Hey, maybe you should take a wellness day, right?" But I mean that's different thinking.

And with the COPS Office, we applied for Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act grant, and got a full-time wellness coordinator to kind of support that peer support team, right? Because as we know our officers that have these ancillary duties usually have four or five, right? So we wanted to make it as easy as possible on them, but also bring some different aspects to that.

Our peer support team is thriving, they're involved in a lot of our wellness activities like our quarterly wellness days talking, you know, doing those critical stress debriefs. So I mean I think it's really pivotal that you have a dedicated team, but then also the culture that supports it, right? Because if you're not supported or taking action when there are people having issues, another thing that like we didn't talk about is everybody knows when there's a really big issue, right? Or something happened, legally, you didn't say anything, but everybody knows if an officer is struggling and we've really taken really good care of our officers.

We've had some go to treatment, quite frankly, and other things and they felt supported or they were having issues and pulled them out of their role and supported, right? But then that also talked about like going in and working with the families, right? Because it's easy enough for an officer to skate by at work,

but if you let the spouse know that you're going to take care of their spouse if something's going on and their livelihood is not going to be affected because they're out of a job, but I mean that's a lot of unforeseen aspects is making a safe and... environment that takes care of people.

Donelan

44:49

And the fact that you guys have seen results so quickly, right? I heard you, chief, when you said we're not going to sit idle, we're not taking any of this for granted, we're going to keep thinking proactively, but the fact that what you've done so far, which is a lot, but the fact that you're seeing results so quickly, the fact that you changed culture so quickly. I mean changing culture is like turning a freight liner around in a canal, and that you're seeing that, that to me is just real proof that this is positive change.

Sitts

45:17

Yeah. I agree. That culture change has to, you know, all cultural changes they need to start from the top down, and you can't forget those police training officers. They play such a pivotal role in that culture change. The days of training someone and going to a very critical incident or scene and looking over and telling the new hire officer like, "Suck it up. We're going to get 10 more of those this month." Those days are over, you know?

Stopping and acknowledging that happened, that sucked, we shouldn't have had to witness that, but we got some support for it. So getting your police training officers on board and making sure those sergeants and everyone up else in that leadership is on board with this new philosophy that, you know, the Rapid City Police Department and I think all law enforcement, when we go through extraordinary steps to make sure we're hiring the right candidate and they're a good fit and they're not broken, but this profession does a great job of breaking them. So we need to make sure we put them back together again.

Kinser

46:07

And I mean that's something too, I mean like I said everybody knows when something's going on and if they see command staff really bending over backwards, investing the time and effort and even if that person does leave on their own volition. It's pretty public. Actions speak a lot louder than words in those aspects.

Donelan

46:25

And you guys are certainly stepping up. You're not just talking about it, you're doing it, and they see that and that's clear. So just like you called that one 10-person police department and asked them about sabbatical leave, I know that we have people who are listening who would love to make contact with

you, why reinvent the wheel if someone's already done it, right? And if you guys are doing it and it's working, why not spread the love? So how can people get in touch with you if they'd like to talk more about any one of the several programs that you've launched?

Sitts

46:52

Yeah. Anyone interested, feel free to email me at scott.sitts@rcgov.org. S-C-O-T-T-dot-S-I-T-T-S-at-R-C-G-O-V-dot-org.

Kinser

47:06

And if you've got some of the funding aspects or a grant person, you can reach out to me, dave.kinser@rcgov.org. That's Dave, D-A-V-E-dot-Kinser, K-I-N-S-E-R-at-R-C-G-O-V-dot-O-R-G. Also, if you don't get these emails, just call the PD and ask for me or Scott.

Sitts

47:28

605-394-4133.

Donelan

47:33

Well, I have a feeling your emails and your phones are going to be blowing up.

Sitts

47:36

Hey, we welcome it.

Kinser

47:36

I'm going to take a sabbatical. [Laughing]

Donelan

47:37

I'm about to take a sabbatical. I cannot thank you guys so much for spending time with us and for being so open and honest and sharing this wealth of knowledge with our listeners here on *The Beat*. I wish you the best of luck. I'm not sure how much you're going to need because it sounds like you are rolling along there. Thank you so much for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Sitts

47:59

Hey, it was great visiting with you. Thank you very much.

Donelan

48:01

Absolutely. Alright, you guys take care and thank you everyone for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Voiceover *The Beat* Exit

48:07

The Beat is brought to you by the United States Department of Justice's COPS Office. The COPS Office helps to keep our nation's community safe by giving grants to law enforcement agencies, developing community policing publications, developing partnerships, and solving problems. If you have comments or suggestions, please email our Response Center at askcopsrc@usdoj.gov or check out our social media on Facebook, www.facebook.com/dojcops, on YouTube, www.youtube.com/c/dojcopsoffice, or on Twitter @COPSOoffice. Our website is www.cops.usdoj.gov.

Disclaimer

49:05

The opinions contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products or services should not be considered an endorsement by the authors or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.