

Management in Law Enforcement

Voiceover

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This is *The Beat*—a podcast series that keeps you in the know about the latest community policing topics facing our nation.

Natalie Hopewell

00:08

Hello and welcome. My name is Natalie Hopewell, and, on behalf of the COPS Office, I would like to introduce Ray Hunt, president of the Houston Police Officers' Union. Ray is here today to discuss decision making that involves both management and labor.

What does the department's social media policy prohibit officers from posting online?

President Ray Hunt

00:31

Our social media policy does not allow an officer to comment as far as being a police officer. They can have their personal views on issues. But if those personal views are going to be inconsistent with the motives of the Houston Police Department, the person is not allowed to be on there in uniform. If they want to have their picture in uniform, that's fine. But if they post themselves in uniform, they cannot have views that are inconsistent with the views of the Houston Police Department. We believe in the first amendment rights, and if someone wants to express their views, that's fine. But when they are doing those in uniform on social media, it leads one to believe that that person is speaking on behalf of the department when in fact they're not.

Hopewell

01:10

And is there any other specifics—what you do to caution officers about what they post online?

Hunt

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Yes. We have a general order on it, and also with our union, we constantly send out to folks that if it's not something that you'd want to put on your church bulletin board, you may not want to put on your social media site. We all know that one of the first things that attorneys do is when an officer is alleged to have committed an offense or alleged to have committed a policy violation, is to go to that person's Facebook page to see exactly what's on there. And even though that Facebook page may be inconsistent with how they handled that particular call, a person could draw incorrect conclusions whenever they see something on the Facebook page. And maybe an officer has been involved in an incident where there's some allegations of misconduct when in fact there weren't. But if it's something on a Facebook page, it could be detrimental to their case. So we caution them from the union side, and the department

cautions them from the department side to simply not infringe on their first amendment rights but also to be cognizant that they can be speaking as a Houston police officer if their picture is on that site.

Hopewell

02:14

Houston recently changed its body armor policy to require mandatory wear in all situations regardless of the heat. The union worked out a compromise with the department to find outerwear vests that are cooler in hot weather. How did you come to this agreement?

Hunt

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Well, our chief lets us attend the command staff meetings. Each command staff meeting, the union's also present during those, so we hear the policy issues from beginning to end. We have very hot temperatures and very humid temperatures here in Houston. So for a while, if the temperature reached a certain degrees, the person didn't have to wear their body armor. The chief was not happy with that because he didn't want someone to get involved in a shooting in the summertime and say well, my policy was the one that probably allowed that person to get shot without having a vest on.

Therefore, we came to an agreement that we would have an outside vest that could be worn which is a lot cooler than the vest that's underneath the shirt. Once that policy was implemented, the chief then said, everyone must wear body armor. So you can either wear it on the outside if you wanted to be cooler or you can continue to wear it on the inside, but there is no temperature now where you're not required to wear it.

It's very difficult for a union to argue against that kind of a policy. We want our officers to be safe, number one. And yes, we're cognizant about the heat here in Houston. But safety has to be paramount, and we appreciate our chief in agreeing with us that if we did an outside body armor, then the policy would be that you had to have the armor on at all times whether it be on the inside or outside.

Hopewell

03:47

How is the union involved with encouraging officers to wear their body armor and seatbelts?

Hunt

03:52

We actually did videos. And each one of our monthly meetings, we tell persons to please wear your body armor, make sure that your seatbelts are fastened, and also to watch the speed on your vehicle. We've said all along that if someone doesn't safely get to a call, they can't possibly help the person who's dropping the assist. So we are big proponents of safety. We do want our officers wearing their vests, we do want them wearing their seatbelts, and we do want them watching their speeds. We also have an officer who had his spinal cord injured in a slow-moving accident while he was on duty. He is now paralyzed from the neck down. And he has done an audio that goes on to our MBT and through our radio periodically throughout each day that says, "This is Officer J.D. Green reminding you to wear your

seatbelts and also to slow down.” We think that when you hear that coming from a fellow officer, it is a lot more powerful than when it’s simply coming from management.

We also did posters where the chief took pictures of himself and I took pictures of myself, and we placed them throughout the departments, throughout the different stations, stating that I pledge to wear my seatbelt for these reasons. I want to, for example, want to go see my daughter next year; I want to see my first grandbaby born—all these things, so that people will look at that and realize that management and labor are on the same side of this safety issue and encouraging officers to wear those seatbelts, to wear their body armor, and to slow down whenever they’re driving.

Hopewell

05:15

What do you see as the biggest barriers to recruiting and retaining officers?

Hunt

05:21

I think one of the biggest ones right now is the issue with pensions across the country. If you’ve got a department that’s not giving the same benefits as comparable city departments—for example, comparable cities, we look for people who we’re competing for, for cadets. We don’t look in Houston; we don’t look in New York or L.A. In Houston, we look in Austin, Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Dallas—those cities that are around us.

And if you’re not giving them a comparable salary to those folks and comparable benefits, especially when it comes to pensions because that seems to be the nationwide issue right now—if one department is offering a 401K and one department is offering a pension, it’s obvious which department they’re going to go to. In our current situation, we have two different pension systems: a two tier pension system where our older officers have DROP, a deferred retired option program, and the new officers don’t. Well, clearly when those new officers are looking for where they’re going to apply for a job, when Austin, Fort Worth, and Dallas has that DROP provision and Houston doesn’t have the DROP provision for the new folks, that presents a problem for us.

If I’m looking at which places are going to provide the best benefits for me and they’re all in the geographically same area, then clearly I’m going to go with the one that provides the better benefits. I believe that benefits and pensions are the number one driver as far as trying to recruit and retain people. We might train someone, and it might take \$40,000 to \$50,000 to train an officer, and then they find out that some other department is offering a much better benefit, not only currently but also the future when it comes to pensions, then they leave us and go to that department. Well, we’ve just wasted \$40,000 or \$50,000 in training that individual.

So it’s very important that your benefits and your pay are going to be attractive to keep someone here throughout a career so that you’re not wasting money on training them and then you become the training ground for other departments throughout the state.

Hopewell

07:16

How is the union using its PAC [political action committee] funds and other strategies to advocate for more resources?

Hunt

07:24

Well, we are very strong with our PAC funds, our political action committee. We contribute to lots of the politicians in the area. And look, those PAC funds don't get politicians to vote your way. Those PAC funds are simply there to get the ear of those folks to hear the kind of resources that we need. When we go to Austin, for example—Austin is our capital here in Texas—we go to Austin and we're arguing to make sure that our pension benefits are retained or that we are able to keep a pension for new folks. We use that PAC money to make sure that we get the ear of politicians so they listen to our side.

It's very common for a politician to listen to management side without having to make any type of political contribution. But when it talks about labor, it's very difficult for a politician to listen to everyone. But if you're making your PAC contributions, at least it gets you in the door for them to listen to you. You're not buying a vote, you're not buying them to your way of thinking, but you are getting in the door so they can hear your side of the story before they make a decision on which way they will vote on a particular issue.

And fortunately, PAC is supported by our police chief. Our police chief even contributes to our PAC. He's also a member of our organization. We think it's very important that the police chief be a member. That doesn't mean that he rules in favor of us simply because he's a member. We frequently have disagreements. But we have disagreements like professionals. And we move on down the road if we can't agree. And we do the best compromise that we can possibly compromise.

Hopewell

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Mr. Hunt, thank you for your time and expertise.

Hunt

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Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

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