

Police can train in the north



Some local law enforcement say the \$1,200 to \$1,500 pricetag for sending officers to the P.O.S.T. Academy in Coeur d'Alene is too much. Other agencies in the Panhandle say it's a bargain. - Ralph Bartholdt

By Ralph Bartholdt

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When St. Maries Police chief Fred Cruzan sends an officer to the police academy for certification in October, the officer will drive 8 hours to the state's Meridian academy instead of the 50-minute drive to attend the academy in Coeur d'Alene.

Although it is less than an hour away, the Coeur d'Alene Police Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.) Academy is too expensive, said Chief Cruzan. The state-run Coeur d'Alene academy costs between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per officer, but officers can train free at the Meridian academy.

Benewah County Sheriff Robert Kirts won't send his officers to Coeur d'Alene either.

"I can't afford \$1,200 per hit," said the sheriff.

The cost looks onerous at first, but many administrators who pushed for an academy in northern Idaho say the benefits outweigh what seems like a hefty price tag for departments.

When it is boiled down, said Rathdrum Chief of Police Kevin Fuhr, his department pays between \$200 and \$300 more to send officers to Coeur d'Alene than it costs to attend at Meridian.

"When we send an officer to P.O.S.T. in Meridian the state pays all of the training costs," said Mr. Fuhr. "That academy basically is free. We pay for travel and a per diem on the weekends."

Mr. Fuhr, who is on the law enforcement advisory committee that pushed to have an academy in northern Idaho, has two officers at the Coeur d'Alene Academy this spring.

Both of the officers have young families, he said. Having the academy close to home allows them to attend daily training and return home in the evening.

"This way they aren't away from their family for 13 weeks," he said.

Being away from their families for lengthy periods has made some officers opt against certification or being full-time cops, and it precludes single parents from pursuing law enforcement careers, said Mr. Fuhr.

"This could realistically help us find people who want to get into law enforcement who have single parent families," he said.

In the past his department flew an officer to the 10 to 13 week course and paid for 2 round trip tickets that allowed the candidate to return home once during the training period.

Airfare along with equipment, uniforms and the \$100 per weekend the officers receive cost the department around \$1,200.

The last time the St. Maries department sent an officer to Meridian it cost the city \$655.

The savings come primarily in travel costs. St. Maries and county officers drive; they don't use the friendly skies.

"They have never asked to," said Stacie Schiermeister, city clerk.

The city pays them the weekend per diem, as well as travel costs for two round trip drives, because officers like to return home at least one weekend to see their families.

"They go down and back twice," Mrs. Schiermeister said.

The future of the Coeur d'Alene P.O.S.T. academy is called P.O.S.T. Academy North and isn't a sure thing.

After its two sessions, one that is in progress this spring with 20 officers in attendance, and another slated for August, a lengthy study by Washington State University will determine if the Coeur d'Alene academy should stay.

"They will make recommendations to P.O.S.T. on the successfulness of the academy," said Mr. Fuhr. "Or, if it had issues they might recommend not keeping it."

A Plummer city officer was among candidates enrolled. Other departments to send officers to the spring academy in Coeur d'Alene were Bonners Ferry, Shoshone County, the Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce tribal police, as well as Post Falls and Coeur d'Alene.

It is the first time the city of Plummer has two officers on its force, so sending a recruit to P.O.S.T. is a new experience for the city.

"We figured it was more cost effective to send (the officer) to Coeur d'Alene than Meridian," said Donna Spier, city clerk.

After tallying prospective expenses, she said, "It was cheaper here than down there."

Wayne Longo, chief of police in Coeur d'Alene said if academy north is given a green light, he expects it to be funded from the same pool of money that funds the Meridian academy, so future training would also be free for the northern Idaho academy.

"We want our share of the funding, so we don't have to pay tuition," he said. "My hope is there won't be any charge after the second academy."

If that happens, small departments like St. Maries and Benewah County's could save a lot of money in their budgets by sending officers north, instead of south.