

# **Low staffing and inadequate equipment in St. Clair County Sheriff's Office reach critical levels**

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BELLEVILLE - Illinois Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) Labor Council is drawing attention to the dangerously low staffing levels of the St. Clair County Sheriff's jail and road units. Staffing in the correctional and patrol units has dropped to the point that inadequate coverage is now a "ticking time bomb" for county residents and taxpayers.

"It's one thing to just look at budget numbers on a ledger and subtract, but it's quite another thing to really examine what that subtraction does," said FOP Labor Council Executive Director Shawn Roselieb. "For the St. Clair County Sheriff's Department, those lower numbers add up to real trouble for citizens."

Despite having hundreds of inmates, the male and female wings of the St. Clair County Jail may have only one correctional officer in each area at a time, plus one officer in booking. These officers are therefore outnumbered almost a hundred to one, without support or backup as they do their rounds and try to keep the peace, with inmates

receiving only minimal observation. At times, some areas of the jail have no correctional presence other than a lone supervisor.

Likewise, the pool of armed officers capable of transporting inmates to and from court diminishes every month as the attrition rate increases.

“This is truly a skeleton crew, and it makes the jail a ticking time bomb where it is only a matter of time before someone gets hurt or killed,” Roselieb said. “Besides the tragedy this would represent to officers or inmates and their families, the taxpayers of St. Clair County would be on the hook for any legal action resulting from the situation.”

To make matters worse, the number of road deputies has dropped so drastically that there are often only two deputies available to cover the County’s 674 square miles and 250,000 citizens. In 2010 the St. Clair County Board budgeted for 53 patrol division deputies; that number dropped to 44 in 2016, and to 31 in 2018. This severe reduction in staff endangers both officers and the public, especially since criminal activity has not reduced proportionately; in fact, there are, on average, at least 20 serious crimes - including homicide, rape and robbery - committed every day in St. Clair County, according to the latest statistics from the Illinois State Police.

“The county has announced that it is so far into the red that it has halted any new hires and is cutting off all overtime expenditures for the sheriff’s office,” Roselieb said. “This means that any vacancies will remain unfilled, and staffing levels go beyond critical every time someone is absent due to sickness, injury or vacation. This is a scenario that criminals love and law-abiding citizens should fear.”

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Sheriff’s Department’s exhausted fleet of patrol vehicles, which are kept running around the clock, is experiencing widespread malfunctions, to include broken air-conditioning in K-9 vehicles, inoperable sirens during pursuits, and engines that stall out at intersections.

The combination of critical staff shortages and widespread vehicle failures come at a time when the county is in the process of committing deputies to patrol more Metrolink areas in St. Louis, Missouri, which will further stretch resources that are already at the breaking point.

The FOP Labor Council, which represents St. Clair County deputies and correctional officers, has grieved unsafe working conditions in the county to no avail. All such grievances have been moved to arbitration, in addition with both unsettled contracts for patrol deputies and jail personnel.

A 2017 referendum for a Public Safety Sales Tax to help pay for St. Clair County law enforcement services failed to receive the required number of votes for passage. However, the County Board's General Reserve Fund contains tens of millions of dollars which could easily fund safer staffing and an improved fleet, if only there were the political will to do so.

“It will be less expensive to make sure the sheriff's department is adequately staffed than it will be to pay lawsuits or deal with the financial and emotional trauma of increased criminal activity,” Roselieb said. “We urge St. Clair County officials to reconsider their actions regarding the county budget and the sheriff's department. Until it they do so, services will remain sparse, officers will remain without backup, the public will experience longer and longer waits for service, and the time bomb will continue to tick.”

The Fraternal Order of Police Labor Council is a law enforcement union representing more than 12,000 professionals in more than 514 bargaining units who work in the criminal justice system. The Labor Council negotiates and enforces contracts and improves salaries, working conditions, and benefits for law enforcement professionals throughout Illinois. Its members include police officers who work for municipalities, universities, and elected Constitutional officials; county sheriff's deputies, correctional and court security officers; probation officers; 911 telecommunicators; law enforcement records personnel; and some related support staff.