

Rookie officers meet seasonal demand in OC

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — When Ocean City's population swells for the summer, so does the resort's police force, which adds rookie officers to meet the season's increased crime-detering demands.

Most of the seasonal officers are college-aged males who haven't even had their first real, full-time job yet.

Reality comes fast when they're handed a gun, a badge, a uniform and a charge to uphold the peace after 191 hours of training. Seventy-eight of those hours are devoted to training on the use of force.

Seasonal officers are most often college criminal justice majors who expect to one day hold full police jobs or attend law school.

For Ocean City and other resort police departments, summer usually brings some complaints about the enforcement habits of seasonal officers. The town's Police Commission, in recent discussions, has raised concerns about who these young officers are.

"I've said on several occasions we need to broaden our focus of people whom we recruit," said Ocean City Councilman Jay Hancock, a former public information officer with the resort police department.

"I think if you're limiting recruiting to one gene pool, so to speak, then you're limiting yourself in what you get," Hancock said. "If you broaden the focus of your recruiting effort, you get a broader selection from which to choose from and you might find more people not as into the (television program) 'Cops' mentality."

Police spokesman Barry Neeb said the department has drastically increased its focus on recruiting for seasonal officers through college visits, bumping them from 32 in 2005 to 49 in 2006.

The results of those visits show a 20 percent increase in applicants, but out of more than 400 tested applicants only 200 passed a background check and about 100 seasonal officers were hired — a number Police Chief Bernadette DiPino said at a May commission meeting was below target.

Hancock said he'd like groups of more life-experienced men and women targeted in recruiting to improve upon overexuberant enforcement he has heard attributed to seasonal officers.

"Look, the nature of the beast is that we're offering a summer job, and that someone who wants that job is in college or a recent college graduate," Neeb said last week. He added that Ocean City's seasonal officers are top-quality despite supply issues caused by tough Maryland background standards.

Dewey Beach hired 40 mostly college-aged males for this season, while Rehoboth Beach hired 27 mostly college-aged males as seasonal officers this year.

Delaware police officials said they avoid the potential age-

and experience-based mistakes in a variety of ways.

"We take (their age) into consideration by what we let them handle and where we put them," said Dewey Chief Clifford Dempsey. "In Dewey, seasonals are unarmed so we can certify anyone over 18."

Rehoboth seasonal officers also don't carry handguns, but Chief Keith W. Banks said the force only hires applicants 20 and older. Recruits also have to pass a psychological test to see if they will be able to handle the rigors of the job.

In Ocean City, summer officers are treated as equals and given assignments in high-problem, high-traffic area such as the Boardwalk.

"We all wear the same uniform to instill the idea when one person shows up, they all have the same responsibility," said Lt. Greg Gupton, seasonal training coordinator for the OCPD.

Hancock, however, said he believes there still needs to be a diverse talent pool to avoid problems with seasonal officer actions that are often publicly discussed.

"With more and a broader group which you're choosing from," said Hancock, "it seems to me you avail yourself the opportunity to increase quality."

■ jhodgkins@dmg.gannett.com



Paulette Arnsperger
501C EAST NAYLOR MILL RD
SALISBURY
a012697@allstate.com

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(410) 677-4774



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