



Multnomah County Sheriff's Office budget: More data needed to solve overtime, staffing issues

staton.jpg

Sheriff Dan Staton's habit of underfunding overtime, then backfilling with staffing funds after he tears through the budget midway through the year, has raised eyebrows on the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. *(Maxine Bernstein/The Oregonian)*

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Getting to the bottom of the **Multnomah County Sheriff's Office overstaffing problems** isn't as simple as cutting excess fat.

It's a complicated process that involves boiling down numbers that aren't even available yet.

That's the message that came out of a Multnomah County auditor's briefing Tuesday before the County Board of Commissioners. The briefing was a follow-up to **an audit released last week** that explored Sheriff Dan Staton's longstanding overtime troubles.

For years, Staton and his predecessors have sparred with county leaders over his agency's hefty overtime spending.

The sheriff's office accounts for about 75 percent of all overtime, across all county departments. Each year, the sheriff spends far more on overtime than he sets aside in the annual budget, then dips into staffing funds to make up the difference.

Last year, for example, the sheriff budgeted \$3.57 million, but ended up spending \$8.17 million on overtime.

In their report, county auditors concluded the overtime issue is a symptom of **a larger problem**: A steady upward creep of overall work hours, despite a jail population that has remained stagnant for several years.

But figuring out how to reduce hours will take more analysis, auditors said.

"We recommend improved data collection," performance auditor Marc Rose

Sheriff's office spending by the numbers...

\$120 million -- sheriff's office yearly budget

\$508,000 -- amount the office went over budget last year

\$3.57 million -- amount budgeted last year for overtime costs

\$8.17 million -- amount spent on overtime

26,000 -- increase in total work hours since 2011

\$5.7 million -- increase in the staffing costs since 2011

\$81.35 -- cost per-hour of overtime

\$121.43 -- cost per-hour of filling vacant positions with new hires to avoid overtime

30 -- hiring target for this year

30-plus -- number of retirements this year

12 -- percent of total sheriff's office work hours that are overtime

said during the briefing. "This is really essential to being able to monitor total personnel costs."

73 -- sheriff's office overtime as a percent of Multnomah County's entire overtime use

Part of the problem with finding the sweet spot in how the sheriff's office should conduct staffing, auditors said, lies in the unpredictability of how many officers will be available for any given work shift.

On a typical day, 65 corrections officers are scheduled to work, but only 50 shifts need to be filled. Rarely do all 65 show up. Typically, somewhere between 45 and 55 people report to their post at work.

That means most days, the sheriff's department either has unneeded officers on duty, or has too few officers on duty and must call people in to work for overtime pay.

The 10 to 20 people who don't show up might be on vacation, in training or reassigned to cover unplanned shifts, such as suicide watch or hospital transport.

Because the sheriff's department hasn't kept detailed staffing records, it's impossible to tell how many of the absences are due to vacations, how many are reassignments and how many are for training.

Commissioners took issue with the gaps in the data. **Judy Shiprack**, who led a decision this year to withhold Staton's overtime budget unless he presented commissioners with quarterly updates on how he is working to reduce overtime, was visibly frustrated.

"If we plan on having 65 scheduled to work, and in reality the best we're doing is 55, that seems like an unacceptable variation from the plan."

County Auditor Steve March said his team looked for specific data on how employees spent their time on the job, but the sheriff's office staffing software didn't contain those details.

In July, the agency began tracking employees' hours more closely. When enough of the new data is available, March said, the sheriff should be able to predict staffing trends and find ways to stop the upward creep in employee hours.

Staton should also be able to back up his claim that an increase in suicide watch shifts is driving staffing hours upward. Suicide watches are unscheduled, unbudgeted shifts that arise when an inmate needs extra monitoring to keep them from attempting to kill themselves.

"It's hard to believe that it's suicide watch if there's no data," Commissioner Liesl Wendt said.

Commissioners grilled auditors about their methodology for the report, and expressed dismay at the audit's finding that shelling out overtime is actually cheaper than hiring additional staff.

Commissioner Loretta Smith asked auditors to look to other law enforcement agencies for guidance on the ideal ratio of overtime to regular work hours. Right now, 12 percent of hours worked in the sheriff's office are overtime.

Last year, commissioners gave the sheriff's department roughly \$800,000 in extra money to cut down on overtime by hiring more staff.

"Now we hear from the audit that overtime is less expensive, so what happened to that \$800,000 we spent?" Shiprack said. "What you're hearing here is frustration. We need to be presented with some kind of clarity for a path, and we're very willing to go forward on that path."

--Kelly House

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