

Alaska Department of Public Safety

Recruitment and Retention Plan Overview: 2018-2023

Introduction

The Alaska Department of Public Safety (DPS) is at a crossroads of critical internal challenges and external demands for public safety service. The state's fiscal crisis has impacted funding for department programs and services and necessitated the net reduction of 36 trooper positions since FY2015. Such significant shifts in the department's framework impact the morale and job satisfaction of all department employees, and particularly troopers in the field carrying out the department's public safety mission on a daily basis. The department has struggled to be an employer of choice due to internal and external perceptions of the department being underfunded and understaffed, combined with the lack of a competitive pay and benefits package.

Article I, Section 12, of the Alaska Constitution sets forth that criminal administration shall be based on the need for protecting the public. The department's ability to adequately fulfill its public safety mission hinges on an adequately staffed workforce of professional troopers. As such, the department is committed to taking proactive steps surrounding retention of current employees and regaining status as an employer of choice. Such steps are underway and significant effort is needed as the department plans for effective change over the next five years. A key requirement involves the legislature and DPS aligning efforts to effectively overcome the impediments identified herein.

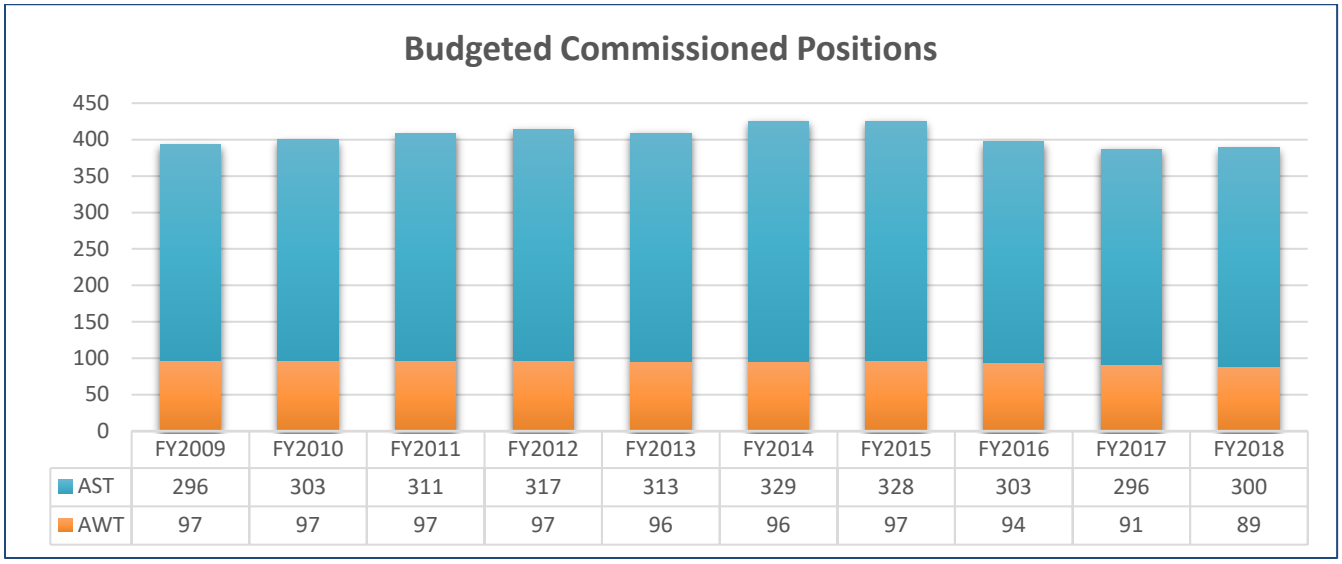
The Alaska legislature requested a report identifying potential barriers to recruitment and drivers of attrition. As such, this document intends to provide a comprehensive overview of current gaps and impediments, as well as critical needs to impact positive change in recruitment and retention. The end goal is to fully staff trooper positions to meet the public safety needs of Alaska and recruit and retain the highest quality workforce.

Coverage Gaps

Over the last five years, the department has experienced increased attrition from the trooper job class, as well as rising vacancy rates. The high attrition rate is primarily attributed to the following:

- Increased retirement rate;
- Increased number of troopers leaving for other departments with better pay and benefits; and
- Lack of fiscal stability in Alaska.

In addition to increased attrition, recruitments have not yielded adequate numbers to backfill vacancies. DPS is currently authorized 300 Alaska State Trooper (AST) and 89 Alaska Wildlife Trooper (AWT) positions. Over the last 10 years the number of authorized positions has fluctuated based on constitutional mandates, legislative actions, and authorized budgets as shown by the chart below:



	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018
AST	296	303	311	317	313	329	328	303	296	300
AWT	97	97	97	97	96	96	97	94	91	89

The department currently has 42 trooper posts throughout Alaska (see **Appendix A** for trooper post distribution map). This number reflects the closure of 8 trooper posts since 2015. The department currently does not have the staffing to meet its goal of providing a trooper presence in every community that desires full service law enforcement.

As of November 2017, the department is operating with approximately 40 vacant trooper positions. Reduced trooper positions, combined with the inability to fully staff all budgeted positions has negatively impacted morale, reduced in-service training, and increased overtime costs for routine shift coverage. Further, gaps in the department's ability to deliver public safety services include reduced ability to respond to routine calls for service (including not responding to some calls that are deemed lower priority), slower response times, reduced travel for proactive law enforcement, and a lack of equipment (e.g. aircraft and boats) to effectively respond to calls for service in rural Alaska.

Impediments to Success

The department's recruitment and retention efforts face impediments stemming from decreased overall funding, lack a defined benefits retirement system, noncompetitive pay, and understaffing. The factors detailed below are projected to impact retention over the next five years.

Recruitment Difficulty for Law Enforcement

Agencies nationwide report an overall downturn in applicants for law enforcement positions, which is readily felt within the Alaska Department of Public Safety. An overall downturn in law enforcement applicants creates a more competitive recruitment climate for law enforcement agencies. The unique demands of the Alaska State Troopers create an extra hurdle as the department competes with agencies both within and outside of Alaska to find qualified candidates. Further, prospective candidates report they find agencies outside of Alaska more appealing due to the defined benefit retirement package offered by other some other states. The demands of the state trooper job class render only about 5% of applicants successful in the selection process.

Projected Retirements

The department's ability to fully staff trooper positions is impeded by large numbers of retirement-eligible troopers over the next five years. Retirement projections indicate 33% of employees at the ranks of trooper, corporal, and sergeant, and 94% of command staff will be eligible to retire within the next five years. Retirements from the command series have a cascading effect as internal promotions are done to backfill the command position, ultimately creating a vacancy at the trooper level.

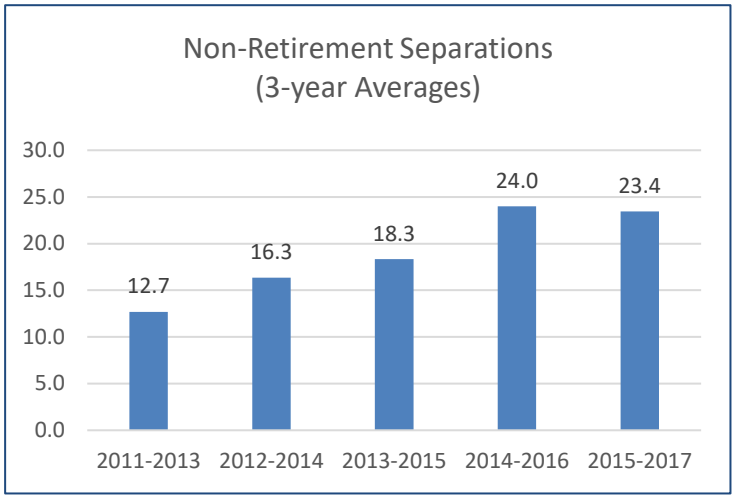
Job Class Title	Now	% Now	Less than 1 year	% Less than 1 year	1-5 Years	% 1-5 years	5-10 Years	Over 10 Years	Tier IV	Total
MAJOR	2	67%			1	33%				**3**
CAPTAIN	9	82%			1	9%	1			**11**
LIEUTENANT	15	71%	2	10%	3	14%	1			**21**
SERGEANT	13	19%	5	7%	27	40%	17	1	6	**68**
CORPORAL									4	**4**
TROOPER	16	7%	5	20%	40	16%	66	6	112	**245**
RECRUIT									9	**9**
Total	**55**	**15%**	**12**	**3%**	**72**	**20%**	**85**	**7**	**131**	**361**

Source: State of Alaska, Division of Retirement and Benefits (12/31/2016)

The State's Fiscal Crisis and Low Staffing

The state's fiscal crisis has increased the perception of a lack of support for the department and ultimately, the work of troopers in the field. Chronic low staffing and high vacancies lead to burnout, leave denials, the inability to allocate staff time and resources to training, and increased overtime and standby demands causing work to infringe on troopers' off-duty hours. Further, the department cut the trooper recruitment unit's budget in 2015 based on uncertainty about the department's ability to hire new troopers due to budget cuts. This has resulted in a significant decline in the number of recruits being hired and ultimately providing coverage to mitigate the impact of increasing attrition.

Non-Retirement Attrition



In addition to retirement separations, non-retirement separations have increased over the last six years, contributing to a rising attrition rate from the trooper job class. Of the non-retirement, voluntary separations over the last four years approximately 72% of employees left DPS for employment with another law enforcement agency. Often other agencies offer increased salary and benefits, higher geographical job assignment certainty, increased back-up due to a higher density of officers in a single geographic area, and a defined benefits retirement package (outside Alaska). Losing a single trained and certified Alaska State Trooper results in the loss of an estimated $190,000 the department invests upfront to recruit, train, and certify a trooper. In addition to the cost, it takes 12-18 months to recruit and fully train new troopers to backfill vacancies.

Lack of Internal Career Progression

There is a perceived lack of career progression within DPS due to the known wage regression when promoting into command series (the ranks of Lieutenant and above). Promotions into the command series are internal, but require current sergeants to leave the PSEA union, resulting in fewer opportunities for premium pay, salary and benefits based on a 37.5-hour workweek (rather than the 40-hour workweek for PSEA), and the loss of overtime eligibility. Potential applicants for command series positions will not leave their current job for increased responsibility, increased personal liability, and longer hours for less pay and benefits.

Inability to market the Department of Public Safety as an Employer of Choice

Retention drives recruitment and entrance surveys indicate that current troopers are the department's best recruiters. However, a workforce that experiences understaffing and burnout does not stimulate troopers to initiate independent recruitment efforts. Additionally, the department's wage and benefit package is not competitive, both within and outside Alaska. The department's current advertised starting salary for a recruit at DPS ranks fifth amongst other agencies in Alaska (agencies offering a higher starting salary include: North Slope Borough Police Department, Anchorage Police Department, Kenai Police Department, and Soldotna Police Department). Further, the geographic uncertainty and requirement to attend an 18-week paramilitary academy dissuades some candidates.

Steps to Successfully Recruit and Retain Alaska State Troopers

Recruitment and retention efforts share the goal of keeping the department staffed at a level that allows it to effectively deliver its mission. The department has taken affirmative steps over the last two years to assess factors contributing to the increasing attrition rate from the trooper job class, as well as identify factors that positively impact retention. Such efforts included exit survey outreach to former employees, increasing alternate work schedule options for urban and rural trooper posts, and conducting an engagement survey of current troopers.

Beginning in 2017, the department re-prioritized recruitment with the understanding that fully staffing the department positively impacts retention. Over the last two years, the department has taken steps to reduce lengthy delays in the hiring process, increase personal contact throughout the selection process, increase the starting wage for trooper recruits and lateral hires, increase department presence at job fairs and community events, and improve social media, digital advertising, and internet content.

The department's recruitment efforts target diverse candidates, as well as factors that are known to positively impact retention, such as Alaska residency and prior military service. The department has historically been unable to effectively leverage the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program as a feeder program for the trooper job class. Many VPSOs are not interested in a career as a trooper due to a lack of interest in full-time law enforcement work and a desire for the geographic certainty provided by the VPSO program. Other factors include the high turnover rate in the VPSO program and some barrier crimes that render VPSOs unable to qualify for the state trooper job class. However, the department, in partnership with VPSO program grantees, is examining the viability of placing a VPSO in the department's recruitment unit to work alongside commissioned troopers to recruit troopers and VPSOs.

Recruitment and retention are among the department's top priorities for the next five years. The ***Recruitment and Retention Initiatives*** on page six include external factors impacting recruitment and retention, the department's needs to resolve each factor, and internal initiatives to strengthen retention and recruitment.

Recruitment and Retention Initiatives: 2018-2023

Factors Impacted by External Needs	
Issue	**Critical Needs**
Lack of a **defined benefit retirement program** is a source of attrition and applicant disinterest	Defined benefit retirement package for law enforcement job classes
Inadequate staffing impedes service delivery, increases overtime expenditures, and causes burnout of existing staff	Ongoing funding for staffing study (partnering with UAA justice center) to determine appropriate staffing levels in accordance with population growth and public safety needs
Wage regression encountered when promoting out of the Public Safety Employees Association into the **DPS Command Series** dissuades promotional candidates and is a source of attrition of command staff	Labor-Management agreement to rectify wage and benefit losses when entering the DPS Command Series
Inadequate funding and lack of fiscal stability negatively impacts employee morale and creates a negative perception of potential employment with DPS	Fully fund the DPS budget to avoid the issuance of layoff notices to employees
Absence of internal full service dispatch and records support unit results in a lack of unified technology systems and diminished trooper field presence due to time spent on administrative tasks	Funding to establish regional dispatch centers, fully leverage technology, and create a statewide records section to improve administrative and fiscal efficiencies and free up trooper time
Inadequate state housing at rural posts causes troopers to hesitate to move their families to rural Alaska	Funding to establish a facilities manager position, as well as renovate and replace existing state housing facilities

Internal Initiatives

The department's effort to maintain core services during the fiscal crisis has necessitated a high-level focus on providing adequate law enforcement with fewer resources. Further, the external factors noted above have had a compounding impact on morale and attrition.

The department is committed to re-focusing on strengthening internal programs that improve recruitment and retention. Such initiatives both planned and underway include:

- Evaluating the viability of recruitment programs targeted at youth and prospective candidates who are pursuing continuing education before entering the full-time workforce. Such programs may include public safety internships, reimbursement for college tuition for students who commit to a defined length of state trooper service after graduation, and Explorer programs
- Re-assessing approaches to staffing deployment
- Establishing ongoing in-service and leadership development training
- Bolstering employee recognition programs
- Improving employee wellness resources, including family support resources
- Developing a 5- and 10-year strategic plan to provide unified vision and direction for all levels of the department
- Evaluating the potential of establishing a position dedicated to coordinating internal retention efforts

Conclusion

Budget cuts and reductions since the state's fiscal crisis have proven that professional and comprehensive law enforcement services require adequate funding and support. An unstable budget climate impedes the stability of the current workforce and creates significant challenges in attracting prospective applicants. The budget climate, reduced resources, inadequate wages, and the inability to provide a defined benefits retirement system have placed the department at critically low staffing levels. Low staffing and reduced funding is detrimental to the department's ability to effectively deliver core public safety services.

The 2018-2023 Recruitment and Retention Plan Overview sets forth internal initiatives to improve retention, and well as critical components that hinge on support from the legislature. Attrition from the trooper ranks results in the loss of a significant investment in training. Improving the department culture will result in improved public safety services and fiscal efficiency for the department. Retaining even five troopers translates to saving an investment of up to one million dollars to train and certify their replacements. An effective, stable, and well trained workforce of professional state troopers directly translates to improved public safety service across Alaska.

Recruitment of state troopers is a long-term investment that must be sustained. Even the most aggressive recruitment efforts do not yield an independent, fully trained trooper on the road for up 18 months. Therefore, support for and commitment to this plan must be a priority for the next five years and beyond. Investing in public safety builds a safer Alaska into the future.

The department appreciates the legislature's interest in the complex factors surrounding recruitment and retention of state troopers and looks forward to working cooperatively on this issue.



ATTACHMENT A: Trooper Post Distribution and Vacancies as of 11/09/2017

