

WELD COUNTY

Jail staff shortage forces sheriff to cut services

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The Weld County Sheriff's Office will reduce services and reassign deputies to the jail because of an ongoing staffing shortage, Sheriff Steve Reams announced this week, shocking county leaders who just had approved an additional \$675,000 for the agency.

The sheriff's office will temporarily suspend animal control services in Weld County and handle some calls for service by phone or through an online reporting system rather than dispatching deputies, Reams said in a news release issued late Monday afternoon.

A lack of funding, workforce problems, changes in state laws regarding law enforcement and an "overall national narrative against law enforcement" made the move necessary, Reams said.

"The Weld County Sheriff's Office has been struggling with staffing for over two years. We have finally reached a point where a shift is required to give employees at the jail relief. I am disappointed we find ourselves here," Reams said in the statement.

Sheriff's office employees will be temporarily relocated and transferred to the jail effective immediately, according to the news release.

Reams' announcement did not specify how many employees will be reassigned. The sheriff did not respond to an interview request from The Denver Post, and agency officials did not provide further information about the planned reduction in services.

The sheriff's office is budgeted for 463 positions agencywide and, as of the beginning of the week, was down 31 positions between sworn deputies and civilian employees, sheriff's Capt. Matt Turner said in an email.

Weld County commissioners Kevin Ross and Lori Saine both told The Post that Reams' announcement, which came hours after the board met with him Monday and approved a budget increase, came as a surprise.

The commissioners asked Reams if he needed additional support and he said he didn't, said Ross, the board's chair.

“It’s shocking to all of us, I believe,” Ross said Monday night. “He’s got to do what he has to do ... he asked us for some budget help and we provided that, so maybe that can help out his situation and bring it back up.”

Saine said she isn’t aware of anyone else providing animal control services in unincorporated Weld County.

“I think there is more than one way to solve the problem, but I would have appreciated the opportunity to solve that problem,” Saine said Tuesday. “There are opportunities in our budget we could have cut to alleviate this problem.”

The main factor the sheriff’s office will use when responding to some calls for service is the severity of the crime being reported, Reams said in the news release. Deputies will respond to calls “based on the resources available.”

Reams said several factors contributed to staffing problems, including a lack of competitive funding for hiring and retaining employees. In his statement, Reams said the Weld County Board of County Commissioners is the source of funding for the sheriff’s office.

The sheriff has been working with the commissioners “for some time” to mitigate the problem, he said. Despite a mid-year funding increase from the county, “staff reallocation will still be necessary for the foreseeable future,” he said in the statement.

“This decision to change our operations and how we serve our community is not something the administrative staff took lightly. It is a sincere desire for the sheriff’s office administration to return to normal operations as soon as the Weld County jail is fully staffed,” Reams wrote.

County commissioners met with Reams on Monday to discuss the sheriff’s budget and approved a mid-year, \$675,000 funding increase for the agency, Ross said. The sheriff’s budget for 2024 is nearly \$66 million, according to county records.

The county commissioners stand by Reams and will do whatever they can to help him, Ross said.

“Even with the funding changes we approved (Monday), it’s going to take time for that to play out, to find people who want to be in law enforcement,” he said.

County commissioners could look at moving animal control to a different department or hiring an outside contractor, Saine said. They could also consider bringing in “outside eyes” to help address issues at the jail, which has seen high turnover rates, she said.

Saine and Ross, both Republicans, laid blame on lawmakers in the state’s Democrat-controlled legislature for creating an environment they said is not friendly to law enforcement.

Staffing shortages are not unique to Weld County — nearly a third of the Denver Sheriff Department’s jail deputy jobs were unfilled in late 2023.

“The sheriff has hit the nail on the head as far as the attitude in the state toward law enforcement,” Saine said. “...We’re seeing some of that repercussion now.”

Statewide applications for police training academies have increased since 2020, according to data from the Colorado Police Officer and Standards Training unit, or POST. Students enrolled in POST classes statewide increased from 936 in 2020 to 1,134 in 2021, dropping slightly to 1,096 in 2022.

More than 97% of POST students passed the certification test in 2022, according to state data.

While more law enforcement employees left their jobs in 2020 and 2021 than were hired, roughly the same number of employees were hired and left in 2022 and more were hired than left in 2023, according to data from POST.

Recruitment and retention are a “generational challenge” dating back to 2010, state spokesperson Lawrence Pacheco said Tuesday, and Attorney General Phil Weiser and POST have fought for additional legislative funding for those efforts.