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## Retirement Exodus Looming for LAPD

**The city wants to build its force, but a deferred departure program will force many officers out.**

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Even as it struggles to expand, the Los Angeles Police Department will face a dramatic departure of seasoned veterans when a special retirement program enacted four years ago to keep senior detectives and commanders in the ranks begins pushing them into mandatory retirement next year.

The exodus will be caused by a deferred retirement program meant to give the LAPD time to fill veterans' shoes and build its ranks over several years. Budget problems kept that expansion from going as planned.

Now, more than 1,600 officers and city firefighters will be required to retire over the next five years, and the Police and Fire departments will have to plug the vacancies.

"People will start bailing out this next fiscal year," Police Chief William J. Bratton said. "We are starting to experience that trickle, but it will get to be a much more significant number in 2007 and 2008."

Those who will be required to retire include four of the department's eight deputy police chiefs and 264 detectives, among them some of the department's most seasoned investigators.

In the next fiscal year, which begins July 1, the department will lose one deputy chief, four commanders, seven captains and 116 detectives. Among those set to leave is the head of the department's anti-terrorism unit.

At the Fire Department, those who must retire because of the Deferred Retirement Option Program, or DROP, include Chief William Bamattre, who will go in 2008. Beyond the chief, the program poses less of a challenge to the Fire Department because that agency has little trouble attracting recruits. In fact, there are more applicants than available positions, Capt. Darnell Wade said.

But recruiting for the LAPD is much more difficult.

The program was instituted in 2002 to sweeten the pot for workers who agreed then to postpone their departures to allow the LAPD a few years to grow significantly before so many employees retired. The program was intended to last five years.

"The whole purpose of DROP was to give the city a window of opportunity to recruit more people, which they haven't done a real good job with," said Bob Baker, president of the Police Protective League.

As Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa prepares his budget for the next fiscal year, he has to factor the loss of people into his plans to expand the departments.

"Whenever we have experienced personnel leaving, it's an issue," said Deputy Mayor Maurice Suh. "But it also creates opportunities in the departments in the upper ranks."

The fallout from the retirement program also could have political implications.

Villaraigosa was elected last year while promising to expand the police force by 1,000 officers during his first term.

To do that, he would have to expand the police force by an average of 250 officers per year. But the retirement program means that he also has to make up for hundreds of retirements before the police

force can grow.

In a normal year, about 300 officers retire, but for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 238 others are facing mandatory departure.

That means Villaraigosa would have to hire 788 officers, slightly more than the capacity of the Police Academy, next year to make up for attrition and achieve his expansion goal. Recruits spend seven months at the academy.

The task will be more difficult because the Police Department is having problems finding people willing to become officers, Bratton acknowledged.

"I'm not sure policing is [as] attractive for a lot of young people as it once was," Bratton said. "There is also a dilemma on the West Coast because of the distances officers have to live from the LAPD to get affordable housing."

**So even as the city is offering bonus incentives and is about to roll out new recruitment programs, Police Commissioner Anthony Pacheco called recently for the city to consider extending the retirement deadline.**

Under deferred retirement, a police officer or firefighter who has at least 30 years of service can continue to work at full salary and receive pension payments, which are put into holding accounts.

At the end of five years, the employee gets the five years worth of pension checks, said Michael Perez, general manager of the Fire and Police Pension Department. The worker also benefits because his or her pension payment rate will have been boosted by five years of cost-of-living increases.

For example, a senior LAPD officer making \$100,000 a year at retirement could draw a pension equal to 90% of his last year's salary.

However, if that officer postponed retirement by entering DROP on June 1, 2002, he would receive \$500,000 in salary plus the cost of living adjustment over the five-year extension period and then retire on June 1, 2007, with an additional lump payment of \$540,000 — the pension benefits he would have accrued had he retired earlier, plus interest.

"It was created several years ago, ironically to give the department breathing room to think of ways to expand the department," Bratton said. "Unfortunately, we ran into a budget crisis over the last three years where it was stop and go for hiring cops."

Mark Leap, the commanding officer of the Counter-Terrorism and Criminal Intelligence Bureau, is one of those who would have been gone by now if it were not for deferred retirement.

Leap has 36 years on the job and has stayed although he could have received the maximum pension, equal to 90% of his salary, if he had retired after 33 years. He said he thinks the deferment program has helped the department.

"It delayed retirements that would have happened four or five years ago," Leap said. "That's a good thing because crime was in the pluses back then. If we had lost all that expertise ... it would have been bad."

The current city budget calls for the police force to reach 9,611 officers by July 1, still fewer than the department put on the streets at its peak eight years ago, when sworn ranks totaled 9,852. There now are 9,314 officers.

Bratton said he is working on the assumption that the retirement program will not be renewed, so he has begun grooming some mid-level command staff to take over for superiors.

"We've already begun starting to line up people who will be prepared to step in when some of those people leave," Bratton said.

For example, Bratton has asked Hollywood-area Cmdr. Mike Downing to follow Leap around for the next

year so he will be prepared to take over the unit when Leap retires as deputy chief next year.

"It's very important that he have the expertise in the issue of terrorism," Bratton said.

The chief has won approval to hire more civilians to take over clerical jobs now handled by sworn officers who will either retire or join officers on patrol.

But some of the initiatives being considered to help overcome staff losses probably will be controversial.

One of them is Bratton's proposal to allow the department to force out officers who have been so severely injured that they are not expected to work the streets again.

"These are officers we know are unlikely to ever return to full uniform capacity," Bratton said. "If you are not able to meet the essential job functions of police officer and the issues that preclude that from happening are permanent, we are going to retire you. Because with the department as small as it is, I can't afford to have several hundred officers who are oftentimes doing civilian clerical duties."

Villaraigosa is still reviewing the proposal and has not yet given approval, Suh said.

Baker, the police union president, said he objects to the chief's definition of "essential duty functions" that an officer must be able to fulfill or risk being pensioned off.

"I don't like the order they wrote," Baker said, but he added, "That's a management right. There's not much I can say about it."

The chief said he sympathizes with the union's concerns.

"They want to care, as we do, for officers injured in the line of duty," Bratton said. "At the same time we are concerned about having enough cops in the streets."