

Florida Highway Patrol Has Almost 200 Vacancies

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Jan. 20--As a boy, Jim Whitman admired the "mystique" of the Florida Highway Patrol trooper, a man driving alone who could handle any situation. After a ride-along with a trooper friend in 1992, he quit his job as a bus driver and joined up.

But after nearly 10 years of patrolling the six counties around Orlando -- and frustrated with the shortage of troopers and low pay -- he quit the FHP and joined the Winter Park Police Department in 2004. He immediately received a \$5,000 pay raise, guaranteed overtime, and merit and cost-of-living increases.

"I loved being a trooper," he said. "But when it comes to making a decision for your family, you have to do what's best for a family."

Whitman is one in a steady stream of troopers who have left over the years to take higher-paying jobs with other police agencies. But since the deadly 70-vehicle pileup on Interstate 4 in Polk County on Jan. 9, several law-enforcement officials and legislators are questioning whether the staffing of FHP is now a public-safety issue.

Only two troopers were patrolling 2,010-square-mile Polk County -- an area about the size of Delaware -- when the early-morning accidents occurred in heavy fog, killing five people. Both had been working crashes off the interstate, including the trooper assigned to serve as "lookout" for visibility problems because of a nearby brush fire and a fog warning.

Speeding, not staffing?

Ed Hotaling, a trooper for 33 years and veteran traffic-homicide investigator until his retirement in 2006, said Polk County was understaffed -- like many other parts of the state.

"Do I think they should have had more people out there?" asked Hotaling, a former FHP union president. "Sure. But if you don't have them, you can't put them out there. . . . They put out all they had to put out."

In an interview with the Orlando Sentinel, FHP's new director, Col. John Czernis, said Mother Nature and speeding drivers caused the accidents, not staffing. He said Florida Department of Transportation officials placed fog- and smoke-warning signs up in the area and FHP patrolled it for much of the night without seeing any problems.

"There's not much you can do about the weather," Czernis said.

But he acknowledged that stabilizing the work force and getting better pay for his 1,600 officers - - especially the 1,194 frontline troopers -- is his top priority.

"We have got to fill and maintain our positions," Czernis said. "We are barely keeping up with attrition."

Working against him, however, is a possible \$2 billion state budget shortfall for 2008-09. FHP pay raises and cost-of-living increases depend on the Legislature. And those are hard to come by in tough budget years.

The FHP has 186 trooper vacancies statewide. FHP officials deny that staffing is causing a safety issue, but not everyone is so sure.

"Over the past eight or nine years, all we hear is you got to do more with less," said one longtime trooper, who has worked in several counties in the state, including Polk. "It's affecting the safety of the motoring public and the troopers themselves. You may not have a trooper for a backup for 60 to 70 miles."

Base pay for new troopers is \$33,977, according to FHP -- lower than many other police agencies in Florida.

Among the 45 states that provided data to Policepay.net for a 2003 survey, FHP paid its troopers the least.

"If you fix the pay, you fix the retention and recruitment problem," said Bill Smith, president of the FHP chapter of the Police Benevolent Association, the union that represents 1,460 troopers, corporals and sergeants. "If you want to see true, dedicated employees, come to the highway patrol. They aren't doing it for the pay."

Smith and other troopers said every FHP district in the state has lost positions to budget cuts over the years. Miami-Dade County, for instance, has dropped from 250 troopers in 1984 to about 103 today, Smith said. Other counties, such as Brevard, remain at staffing levels from the 1970s, he said.

Meanwhile, Florida's population has swelled to 18.7 million people with 84 million annual visitors, while the number of vehicles, new roads and traffic continue to increase. Today, the agency has primary responsibility for more than 12,000 miles of interstates, toll roads and other state highways and 71,000 miles of secondary roads.

In fiscal year 2006-07, according to FHP, the agency made 381,800 speeding arrests, 10,814 drunken-driving arrests, worked nearly 231,000 crashes and patrolled more than 31.6 million miles.

Former Trooper Whitman remembers "running from crash to crash," sometimes 80 miles apart. "The joke among troopers was Orlando [Troop D] was the place to be sent to be punished because of the workload."

Maj. Ernie Duarte, FHP's chief spokesman, said staffing has been redistributed across the state as it has grown.

Still, some wonder whether lives could have been saved in the Polk County accidents if more troopers had been working.

"The more police officers you have on the road, the safer the road," said state Rep. Mary Brandenburg, D-Lake Worth, who fought FHP budget cuts last fall. "When you drive past a police officer [trooper] on a highway, you immediately slow down. As a taxpayer, I'm willing to pay for more troopers."

Looking for raises

Czernis has asked the state for an additional \$6.9 million in next year's budget to give troopers a \$500 increase for each year on the job, with a maximum of \$5,000.

The PBA is backing Senate Bill 920, which would add \$10 and \$15 surcharges to the reinstatement fees for suspended and revoked drivers licenses to help boost FHP salaries.

For now, the agency must compete with better-paying city and county police agencies, such as the new cities of Miami Gardens and Doral, which can offer signing bonuses, incentives or salaries up to \$12,000 more.

Last year, Orange County Sheriff Kevin Beary hired an FHP sergeant and four troopers from Tampa.

"It's a great deal for me and the citizens of Orange County," Beary said. "I'm hiring people who are experienced and trained. The state of Florida has failed to pay for [enough] troopers and traffic enforcement."

Because of trooper-staffing problems on I-4 in Orange, Seminole, Osceola and part of west Volusia counties, the Florida Department of Transportation has contracted since 2004 for up to 21 troopers daily to patrol the roadway -- though manpower constraints often limit that to 15 or 16, said Jennifer Heller, an FDOT official in DeLand. The increased patrols on those 54 miles has cut accidents 21 percent and increased trooper-response times, she said.

The Florida Turnpike reimburses FHP from toll revenues for patrolling those highways. But no such repayment request or need for a similar arrangement has been discussed for the 32 miles of I-4 and in Polk County, said FDOT spokeswoman Cindy Clemmons-Adente.

For now, troopers hope once again that the Legislature will help them.

"I have nothing but respect for those guys who are doing the job," Whitman said. "They do it for the love of the job and for the love of the agency. It's going to take a major legislator's family member to be involved in a tragic accident before they do something for troopers."