

# Vt. State Police suffer chronic staff shortage

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MONTPELIER - A chronic staffing shortage in the State Police is likely to get worse due to a \$3 million budget shortfall coupled with a lack of recruits in training, officials say.

Yesterday, the state Senate's president pro tem and Judiciary Committee chairman joined the heads of the State Police union and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to lay the blame for the situation at the feet of Governor Jim Douglas.

"The governor's rhetoric on public safety has not matched his actions," said the president pro tem, Senator Peter Shumlin, Democrat of Windham. He released a chart showing a continuing staffing gap since Douglas became governor in 2003, one that had existed under the previous governor, Howard Dean, as well.

The State Police were authorized to have 345 sworn officers, ranging from trooper to colonel, in 2004; the force had 296 of the positions actually filled. In the current year, 348 positions are authorized; 303 are filled, Shumlin's chart said.

Public Safety Commissioner Thomas Tremblay, a former Burlington police chief named to his new job in January, disputed Shumlin's assertion that the numbers show a lack of commitment by Douglas to fighting crime.

"I think Senator Shumlin, quite frankly, is wrong on this," said Tremblay. He said he had spent his first six weeks on the job going through the department's budget, looking for "operational efficiencies," and preparing a plan to address staffing issues.

Tremblay repeated a lament shared by many police agency leaders in recent times: the difficulty in finding recruits to fill slots. Tremblay also expressed annoyance that Shumlin had decided to organize his press conference before discussing the concerns with him.

"I was really confused by the fact that Senator Shumlin didn't reach out to me, the commissioner of public safety, to hear my concerns and talk about my plan for the future staffing of the State Police," Tremblay said.

One issue raised by the senators was State Police recruiting of local officers to join the usually better-paying state force. Senator Richard Sears, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, recalled an instance in which the Wilmington Police Department lost three of its five officers to the State Police in one year.

Tremblay said later that staff shortages and competition for recruits are being felt by police departments around the country. ■