



# TOWN OF OLD SAYBROOK DEPARTMENT OF POLICE SERVICES

36 Lynde Street • Old Saybrook, Connecticut 06475

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Michael A. Spera  
*Chief of Police*

Board of Selectmen  
Police Commission  
302 Main Street  
Old Saybrook, Connecticut 06475

July 13, 2023

## ***Re: Staffing Crisis of Certified Police Officers – A Call to Action***

Leaders of Old Saybrook:

I write to you today to ask for your help with what I feel is becoming a dire public safety issue. The staffing of full time, certified law enforcement professionals in our Agency has reached a critical point and is only forecasted to become more dire.

There are twenty-five (25) full time authorized and funded positions in our Agency. Currently, including myself, we have seventeen (17) active police officers. The remaining eight (8) positions are described as follows:

- one (1) employee on restricted duty for at least the next eight (8) months
- two (2) employees who are about to begin ten (10) weeks of field training.
- two (2) employees that will be entering the police academy for the next twenty-seven (27) weeks
- three (3) positions that are vacant.

Additionally, and sadly, there are three (3) additional employees who are actively involved in lateral hiring processes with other municipal / constabulary police agencies.

In early 2021, I was tasked to complete a report on sworn employee turnover. While I believe the intent of this report was highly political and an attempt to place blame on me for the issue, facts contained in the comprehensive report revealed something different. I do acknowledge that some turnover has been about me. There were some who left because they did not like me, or do not like having a boss that requires a work product, or both. There are also some that have left at my urging or at my request that they be terminated because they were not a fit for our community or the law enforcement profession. I do not hide from this. However, overwhelming the facts show that 1) sworn employee turnover is not solely an "Old Saybrook" issue and 2) that employees were leaving our employ for communities that offer better employment benefits and post-employment benefits. Since the presentation of this report, media accounts of a recruitment and retention issue of law enforcement officers have appeared nationwide. In fact, the recruitment and retention of professional, certified law enforcement officers

has arguably become the number one issue facing law enforcement today. Old Saybrook cannot and has not escaped this issue.

Attached you will find the results of a two-month project that included the collection of collective bargaining agreements (CBA) and pension plans for all municipal police agencies in Connecticut along with the extraction and organization of employee benefit data. The DRAFT document does not currently compare the information to Old Saybrook's CBA and pension plan. Rather the document is sterile and is intended to be used as a point of reference.

Anodically, Old Saybrook's employee benefits are mediocre. While this used to be satisfactory, the current climate and lack of desire to attain a position as a law enforcement officer has made our run-of-the-mill benefits no longer attractive to new employees and not attractive to current employees. Please understand I am not insinuating that Old Saybrook has done anything deliberately to cause this matter. Old Saybrook, like myself as your Police Chief, are forced to lead during a unique, yet very real, situation concerning the recruitment and retention of Law Enforcement Officers. If not addressed, the Department's ability to provide safe, efficient, traditional law enforcement services may be questionable. This is a sentiment that I do not make lightly and never thought I would ever have to communicate in my career.

For many years Old Saybrook has successfully negotiated labor agreements with its police officers. The Town has provided fair wages and benefits while eliminating long term liabilities. The intent of this letter is not to place blame on any person and/or any board/commission. In fact, at this moment in time, there is no one to blame. No one has done anything wrong. However, because of external changes, these well negotiated and approved labor agreements (by both the Town and Union) no longer satisfy employee needs and therefore are negatively impacting local recruitment and retention of certified police officers.

As you can imagine the topics include compensation, personal leave time, and medical insurance. Categories involving post-employment benefits such as healthcare, pension calculation, the inclusion of a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), and years of service required to retire are topics where Old Saybrook is simply not competitive.

As just one example, Old Saybrook has lost four (4) police officers to the City of Middletown. Currently the City of Middletown pays more and provides full pension credit for prior years of service at a different agency (*up to three years and the option to purchase an additional three years*) and allows normal retirement at twenty years of service. Post-employment benefits include family healthcare coverage, department overtime included in the pension calculation, and an annual cost of living adjustment. As you have already figured, an Old Saybrook Police Officer with three years of service can transfer to the City of Middletown Police Department with no losses and incredible gains. These include making a higher wage immediately, the ability to retire in seventeen (17) years rather than in twenty two (22) years, the ability to have all time serving the

community count towards a pension benefit, a guaranteed annual cost of living adjustment, and health care for both the employee and his/her family upon retirement.

At this point in the discussion thoughts such as "Old Saybrook is a better place to be a police officer than Middletown or any other city that has better benefits" arise. I agree. However, it is not your nor my opinions that matter. We are not part of the workforce that we are attempting to recruit and retain. We can continue to praise ourselves for our fiscal responsibility and our beautiful community, which will not address the current crisis we are facing, or we can acknowledge the crisis and act.

**Please accept this communication as a call for immediate action.**

I seek the assistance of the Police Commission, the First Selectman, the Board of Selectmen, The Board of Finance, the Pension and Benefits Board, the Finance Director, Town Labor Counsel, and Union Leaders to work with my Office to quickly and aggressively address this matter. Let's work together to create an employee benefits package that both attracts certified police officers to our community and inspires them to stay, increasing employee retention and longevity, while stabilizing the police operation.

To provide an analogy for you, our house is on fire. I am not seeking a small amount of water to bring the fire under control. I am seeking a deluge of water to put the fire out.

First, I am requesting permission to take immediate action to fill some of our open positions with State of Connecticut, Certified Police Officers by offering a structured signing bonus in the amount of twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000). I propose that this bonus is paid in the employee's first paycheck and then every six months thereafter until the full amount is paid. I also propose offering a one thousand, five-hundred-dollar (\$1,500) bonus for current employees if they successfully recruit a new police officer. I do not know who needs to provide me with permission to move forward with these ideas or exactly how it will be funded (I do have ideas). But it is a step we must take, and we should start by asking legal counsel to draft the necessary documents and outline the path for us. It is my hope to announce this recruitment effort no later than August 1<sup>st</sup>.

Secondly, we must increase the salary structure of the Department. Currently a senior public safety dispatcher earns four thousand, seven hundred forty-four dollars (\$4,744) more than an entry level police officer. The public safety dispatchers earn and deserve their compensation; however, this highlights a drastic underpayment of our officers. I propose immediately raising the salary of all full time sworn members of the Department by ten thousand dollars (\$10,000). This will bring our salaries more in line with other agencies, prevent compression in the Department's certified law enforcement officer salary structure, and allow an entry level police officer to earn five thousand dollars (\$5,000) more than an senior public safety dispatcher.

We should also join other communities in providing credit for, or allow the purchasing of, years of service so that lateral transfers remain whole upon transfer to Old Saybrook. This has been a very attractive benefit to officers who have left our employ and are

contemplating leaving. Let's turn this practice that has harmed us, into a benefit that will help us.

Finally, we must make comprehensive and immediate changes to the Town's post employment benefits for police officers. These enhances must include:

- Healthcare for employees upon retirement (at a minimum).
- Department overtime included in the calculation of the pension benefit.
- The inclusion of a structured, annual, cost of living adjustment.
- The reduction of required years of service for normal retirement from twenty-five (25) years to twenty (20) years.

Post-employment benefits are considered when seeking employment. Again, we can tell ourselves that post-employment benefits are only a factor in retaining employees, but we are not representative of the workforce. Post-Employment benefits are very much part of the recruitment process.

It is my hope that we can make these post-employment benefit changes by September 1<sup>st</sup>.

I understand that my call to action is aggressive. Old Saybrook, thanks to strong leadership, is fiscally sound. Our pensions are well funded, our long-term debt is minute, our raining day fund is fiscally strong. Additionally, I have thoughts on how we can mitigate the increased costs that the recommended pension enhancements may cause. Old Saybrook is well poised to attack this crisis head-on and become a community that attracts and retains professional law enforcement officers.

I truly need your help to address this immediate and critical public safety matter. I cannot do it alone. I feel it is my professional obligation and a matter of public concern to ask for your help. I look forward to immediately and actively participating in an bi-partisan approach to resolve this critical matter. Time is of the essence.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Spera  
Chief of Police