

Public safety officials paint bleak picture

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Picture Caption: "If you're involved in the systems you can feel it. If you've never been a victim of a crime ... it's hard to understand." Lindi Baker Josephine County Circuit Court judge

When three state legislators attended a meeting of local public safety officials on Wednesday, they heard dire stories about the impact from cuts to Josephine County public safety programs.

The three — Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr. and Reps. Carl Wilson and Duane Stark — heard from members of the Josephine County Local Public Safety Coordinating Council, whose members represent criminal justice agencies, social services organizations and local governments.

Sheriff Dave Daniel said the size of his patrol force on any given night already is only one to four deputies, with more potential cuts in the offing.

"Our response is not appropriate to the needs of the community," Daniel said.

He warned that more cuts could take place next year, if federal funding to the county continues to decline or ends altogether. Local voters have repeatedly turned down tax proposals to make up the shortfall.

"There potentially could be very little or no Sheriff's Office," Daniel said.

Other public safety council members expressed the following concerns:

- Grants Pass Public Safety Director Bill Landis warned that misdemeanors — including trespass, minor theft and DUII — might not be prosecuted if the funding isn't continued. He also called the current criminal justice system "a Band-Aid," with shorter sentences and probation due to limits on the number of inmates held at the Josephine County Jail. Landis also said a lack of sheriff's detectives burdens his department in major cases.

"We are already in some ways in an emergency," he said.

- Josephine County Circuit Court Judge Lindi Baker said the county faces serious issues.

"If you're involved in the systems you can feel it," she says. "If you've never been a victim of crime ... it's hard to understand. But when you're sitting from my position you're seeing the very serious crimes.

"My concern is people becoming desensitized," she said. "We don't want this to become the norm."

- Karla McCafferty, executive director of Options for Southern Oregon, the county's main mental health services provider, said lack of officers is a problem.

"Having limited police limits the work we can do for people — and vulnerable people — in our community," she said. "We need police response because things don't always go the way they're supposed to."

McCafferty worried about the safety of her workers in the remote Illinois Valley and said the situation affects her organization's ability to recruit professionals.

"People don't want to come to a community where they don't feel safe," she said.

- Grants Pass Mayor Darin Fowler said vagrancy was up and that juvenile services were down. The county's juvenile shelter and detention facility in the city has closed. He worried that the jail would close, too.

"I would hate to think of this as the new normal," he said. "We're in a perilous situation. There's kind of a feeling of lawlessness. Anybody looking at it from the outside would clearly see we are not keeping our citizens safe."

Fowler told the legislators their help might be needed, if new funding isn't found.

"We're going to be looking to you for help," he said. "Please help us find the solution."