

The Pueblo Chieftain

Your print and online news source for Southern Colorado

Published: June 08, 2008

Pueblo boasts educated cops



Jim Billings

Most police departments do not require the level of education of its applicants that Pueblo does.

By NICK BONHAM
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

When it comes to education requirements, Pueblo cops have earned a degree of distinction.

The police department is in the slim 2 percent of city law enforcement agencies in the country that require a four-year college degree of its applicants, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police Web site.

Pueblo Chief Jim Billings implemented the requirement in 2003.

A 34-year veteran of the force who is nearing his 10th year as chief, Billings said this week that he's pleased with the caliber of recruits that have applied and now wear a badge.

"I think the quality of candidates we're getting is exactly what we need," Billings said. Some of Pueblo's finest, however - although not publicly - criticize the education standard.

It shuns qualified candidates with prior military and law enforcement experience, they say, reduces

the talent pool from which candidates are drawn and makes it harder to become a Pueblo cop.

There's some truth to that.

For example, a military veteran with eight years in the service but no bachelor's degree cannot be a sworn officer for the city of Pueblo. Neither can a transferring officer with patrol experience in another jurisdiction but sans sheepskin.

"I don't think it's an issue of fairness because there are a lot of grants, student loans and opportunities out there to go to college," Billings said. "I often hear the story about the guy in the military and 'Well, he can serve his country but he can't get a job?' There are opportunities to get an education in the military. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's feasible.

"There are a lot of older officers who oppose the college requirement because they feel, in the view of myself and others, that because they don't have a college degree we don't consider them to be good officers. That's not the case at all. I'm very proud of every officer in the department."

Some departments require an associates degree or to have completed 60 college semester credit hours. Others require just a high school diploma or General Equivalence Degree.

Having both educated and experienced cops would be ideal, the chief said, but filling vacancies on the department has never been a problem.

"We've always had more candidates than vacancies," the chief said. "If you can get the people with higher education who fit the criteria - who can pass the physical exams, written exams, the polygraph and the other rigorous requirements - why would you want to lower your standards?"

According to statistics from the Civil Service Commission, which handles the city's hiring process, the number of police candidates that have applied with the department since 2000 (the last year available) have not been consistent.

"There is no account for it so I preface it to the college degree requirement, but I'm impressed with the number of minorities we are attracting," said Stephen Bolton, the Civil Service administrator for the past 17 years. "We now have two black people on the department, one who came in the last recruiting period, and more Hispanics and women are applying."

Before the college degree standard, the police department was losing about 25 percent of candidates during their one-year probation period.

"As far as the retention rate goes now, I think it's excellent," Billings said. "We've only lost a couple (candidates) because they were people that, for whatever reason, decided not to stay in law enforcement."

When Billings joined the force in 1975 he admitted he had only "a little" college under his duty belt.

Since then he's earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from then-University of Southern Colorado and master's degrees in criminal justice and public administration from the University of Colorado's campuses in Denver and Colorado Springs. He also is a graduate of the FBI Academy.

It was during his schooling that Billings said he concentrated on studying the effects of higher education and law enforcement and found that officers with more education have new ideas and possess higher skills in technology and communication.

"It just shows that we pay attention to research. Pueblo's a leader, not a follower," Billings said.

BECOMING A COP - Total applications and those accepted to academy:

Numbers of minorities and females hired by year:

Year	Number applied	Number accepted
2000	33	13
2001	66	27
2001	124	48
2002	74	40
2003	41	21
2005	66	23
2006	42	27
2007	38	18

- Source: Civil Service commission

* Note there were two recruiting periods in 2001 and no recruitment in 2004; hires that year were chosen from an existing waiting list.

Total hired

Year	Total	Minority	Female
2000	4	0	1
2001	18	5	3
2002	9	5	1
2003	8	1	1
2004	11	4	2
2005	0	0	0
2006	6	0	0
2007	8	4	2
2008	9	5	4

- Source: City of Pueblo recruitment office