

San Antonio

Express-News JUL 13 2008

Troopers say they are just fatigued

By Gary Scharrer

AUSTIN — A state trooper in North Texas idolized his father, a cop, and waited for the day that he, too, could wear a law enforcement badge.

But it doesn't appear the young trooper will reach his 10th anniversary with the Department of Public Safety.

"That's all I ever wanted to do. It's all I know. I have no reason to leave other than I just don't want to work for these people anymore," said the trooper, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Sure, DPS officers want better pay, "but that has nothing to do with our morale problems," said the trooper, who plans to leave the agency. "It is entirely management and working conditions, without a doubt."

Several DPS troopers spoke to the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News about life in the troubled agency on condition they not be identified. All said retaliation would be certain, as superiors would punish their candid speech with demotion or undesirable assignments. The troopers describe an agency beset with terrible working conditions caused, in part, by staffing shortages and nit-picking superiors more interested in bureaucracy than law enforcement.

DPS Director Col. Tommy Davis announced his retirement last week, but troopers contend the agency's problems run much deeper than its top leadership.

A "a good ol' boy" approach pervades the agency, some of the troopers said. And the shortage of troopers and resources leaves the department continually scrambling, they added. Many routinely work six or seven straight days and sometimes 10 or 11, they said.

Many of the troopers' complaints are valid, said Allan Polunsky, chairman of the Public Safety Commission, which oversees the department.

"That's why we need to completely modernize the department, throw old-time thinking out the window and embrace ideas that are more relevant to the 21st century," Polunsky said.

The San Antonio lawyer said he continually speaks with troopers, often stopping when he sees them parked along highways. He's aware of their complaints.

Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston,

said DPS leaders must tell lawmakers about their true needs.

Whitmire is especially concerned about drug trafficking, which results in higher insurance rates, more home and car burglaries and more overall crime — and crowded prisons, he said.

But DPS has neither the equipment nor the troopers to deal with drug trafficking, he said, adding, "That's unacceptable."

Some troopers concede they don't look for illegal drugs during a traffic stop or check to see if the motorist is a convicted sex offender violating his probation.

"I'm not going to look for dope. ... I'm not going to look for anything else because if I do, I'm not going to get enough speeding tickets, I'm not going to get enough seat-belt tickets, and I'm not going to get DWI arrests," said the North Texas trooper.

More complicated violations resulting in arrests means "you don't have the magic number of speeders and you get hammered (by superiors)," the trooper said.

The short-staffing means troopers are rotating through South Texas shifts to beef up border security as part of Operation Border Star. The rotations involve 13-hour days for 15 days, now expanding to 28 days, with no more than a single day off every five or six days, they said.

A Dallas-area DPS sergeant with nearly 20 years in the agency — who is counting the months and days before his exit — says morale is "the lowest it's ever been."

"DPS brass doesn't have a clue what our needs are, for the most part. Most of them are so far removed, and we've become so bureaucratic. Stuff that I used to be able to just go out and do, I now have to write a memo that I'm thinking about doing this, and then I have to write another memo after I did it," he said.

One of the agency's core problems, he said, is the layering of new responsibilities without funding to meet them.

The agency has 250 officer vacancies and cannot recruit enough candidates to fill them. Just over 100 graduates from the DPS training academy will join the agency this fall. But the hole will get bigger because of retirements — and nearly

25 percent of DPS graduates quit before their 10th anniversary, according to department statistics.

The state's Operation Border Star is a particular irritant because it requires troopers to temporarily move to the border region — away from their families — causing shortages in other areas.

A veteran trooper in West Texas the operation a huge waste of time and money.

"It is not productive. It is being used for political purposes," the trooper said.

He recently worked a 13-hour night shift during which he stopped one motorist for speeding.

"Not another vehicle came down that highway the entire night. I sat in my vehicle and did nothing," he said.

An Austin area DPS officer said the trooper shortage curtails, if not cancels, days off — and troopers get one year to take their holiday or comp time before losing it.

The Governor's Mansion fire, blamed in part on inadequate DPS staffing and broken equipment that allowed an arsonist to breach security, has focused attention on the agency. But the Austin trooper is not optimistic about major changes.

"These problems are not new and if the Legislature was unaware of them, they must be the largest collective body of idiots in the U.S.," he said.

Addressing the problems, he said, will require lawmakers to:

- Increase trooper pay to levels at the highest-paid police department in Texas.
- Institute a fair promotion process for all ranks.
- Purchase the best equipment available.
- Ensure that troopers don't have to relocate families to get a promotion.

The DPS commission chairman pledged that agency leaders would do "whatever it takes" to transform the department into one of the country's premier state police departments.

"We want to make sure that our employees have the best working conditions that law enforcement officials can operate under," Polunsky said.