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Police, Fire Departments Face Budget Axe

Public Safety Has Traditionally Been Spared Belt-Tightening, but Deep Cuts in Tax Revenue and State Aid Are Changing That

By STEPHANIE SIMON

The bleak arithmetic of the recession has pushed cities across the nation to make deep cuts in police, fire and emergency medical services.

Some cities are eliminating hundreds of patrol-officer and firefighter positions and taking ladder trucks and ambulances out of service. Others have announced they will no longer respond to entire categories of calls, such as burglaries, check fraud, shoplifting and traffic accidents involving minor injuries.

San Diego just auctioned off its police horses. Colorado Springs, Colo., has put its two police helicopters up for sale online. In Phoenix, Mayor Phil Gordon, a Democrat, said wearily that he may no longer be able to attach officers to federal task forces running down leads on terrorism, drug trafficking and child exploitation.

Mr. Gordon's latest draft budget calls for laying off 236 officers. A tentative deal with the police union for a 3.2% salary cut may save some of those jobs, but even so, the expected layoffs—on top of normal attrition with no replacement hiring—will leave the Phoenix force at less than 85% its authorized strength.

Crime has been dropping, Mr. Gordon said. But he is struggling to see how Phoenix will be able to field 'enough officers to do the day-to-day work of responding to problems, much less trying to prevent them.'

Public safety, considered a core government duty by voters on the left and right alike, has traditionally been protected from belt-tightening despite the fact that it consumes a big chunk of most budgets. Laying off police officers isn't popular. And most police and fire forces are unionized, with multiyear contracts that may preclude salary freezes, furloughs and other cost-saving measures.

'These are the cuts of last resort,' said Chris Hoene, research director for the National League of Cities.

Cities have sustained sharp reductions in both tax revenue and state aid. That has led to municipal budget gaps totaling billions of dollars nationwide, forcing municipal officials to shrink public-safety forces that in many cases they had spent the past decade building.

Cities can, and have, cut other services—shutting libraries, scrapping parks programs, deferring road repair, even unscrewing streetlight bulbs. Yet that only gets them so far.

Public safety accounts for 22% of general municipal spending nationally, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. That's second only to education, which accounts for about 27%.

At some point, it becomes counterproductive to shield public safety from budget cuts, said Los Angeles Councilman Bernard C. Parks, the city's former police chief. It does no good to have a robust police force, he said, if there isn't enough money to fix its vehicles, process its crime reports or buy its equipment.

In the past year, 14% of cities have cut public safety and the number is expected to jump in the next two years, according to the National League of Cities. Already, wrangling over the next budget has begun in many cities, with politicians seeking wage concessions from police and fire unions in a bid to minimize layoffs.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has proposed closing as many as 20 fire companies and losing 1,300 cops through attrition, which would reduce the police department to 80% of its 2001 staffing level. Much smaller towns such as Bossier City, La., and East Providence, R.I., are also bracing for cuts.

In some cases, citizens will notice little change; there may be fewer officers at schools or fewer supervisors back at the station, but that's it. Other departments, however, have shed core services or are asking the public to take on duties such as driving sick neighbors to the hospital rather than calling 911.

Colorado Springs police no longer will deal with abandoned vehicles unless they pose a hazard. Officers are unlikely to respond to property crimes unless they have a solid lead on a suspect. They have lost a couple SWAT team members, a couple gang officers and a supervisor who helped victims of domestic violence navigate the legal system.

During a spate of armed robberies this winter, the department keenly felt the loss of its police helicopters. Tracking and pursuing suspects on foot and in cars wasn't nearly as effective, Lt. David Whitlock said.

"Clearly, our message to the public will be, there are some things we're just not able to do," Colorado Springs police Lt. David Whitlock said.

In Phoenix, police union president Mark Spencer said precincts are so short-staffed that it can take two hours to answer calls for lower-priority emergencies such as fights in progress or a hit-and-run. "If you're not injured in an assault, we won't call it a crime right now," Mr. Spencer said. "There's very little we can do about it."

Some police chiefs said the lean budgets have pushed them to do better. San Diego Chief Bill Lansdowne trimmed a number of specialized units to save money—including narcotics, canine and harbor safety—but assigned more officers to beat patrol. He believes that bulked-up street presence is preventing crime. "We are much more efficient," Chief Lansdowne said.

But others said efficiencies aren't everything in public safety. "Trying to find the breaking point of a police department is a very dangerous budgetary game to play," said New York Councilman Peter F. Vallone Jr., a Democrat. "The thin blue line is being stretched to its limit."

Write to Stephanie Simon at stephanie.simon@wsj.com

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