

Small Towns Adjusting To Life Without A Police Department

BY JAMES RAGLAND
The Dallas Morning News
(MCT)

KEMP, Texas — It's a crime what City Hall did last month, some residents of this town say.

But eliminating the entire police department — chief and all — is just a sign of these penny-pinching times, according to law enforcement experts.

That's little comfort to Cleo Brewer and other townsfolk, many of them retired and living on fixed incomes.

"No one wants to say their town doesn't have a police force. It's an invitation for trouble," said Brewer, owner of the Western Cafe, a popular eatery that has been tempting patrons with its catfish plate specials for 25 years.

Other residents of this relatively quiet town of 1,100 say the city simply had no choice.

For several years now across the country, rural towns like Kemp have been disbanding their police departments because they can't afford them anymore.

While the overall number of law enforcement agencies in the nation went up from 2004 to 2008 — the latest years for which national statistics were available — smaller departments with fewer than 10 officers dipped about 2.3 percent, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The trend is troubling to some experts, who say residents in towns without a police force typically endure longer response times, particularly for non-emergency calls. The towns also lose a familiar presence.

"When you decide to eliminate your agency, there are going to be consequences," said Dianne Beer-Maxwell, a project manager for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, based in Virginia.

In some cases, such as in Alto in central East Texas, a town might cut its police department but restore it later. Alto, with a population of about 2,000, axed its department last June and, six months later, reinstated a scaled-down force.

"The larger police departments are not going to go away," said James McLaughlin, general counsel and executive director of the Texas Police Chiefs Association.

For smaller towns, said McLaughlin, a former chief in Longview and Addison, the decision to ax or scale back police departments often comes down to money and "perceptions."

The small town of Shepherd in southeast Texas, for example, established a police force a few years ago and quickly shut down the one-man operation because the town couldn't afford it.

The question now is whether Kemp will be like Alto and restore its department, or like Shepherd, which remains without one.

"If that (saving money) is the sole reason, how much money will they save?" said McLaughlin. "And what will they gain for that? It's a swap. The citizens ultimately will have to decide whether that was a good swap."

The Kemp Police Department became the latest casualty when the town decided to lay off its five-person force and let the sheriff's department take over patrols.



LARA SOLT/DALLAS MORNING NEWS/MCT
Kaufman County Sheriff Deputy Kenneth Martin serves an arrest warrant to a woman who violated probation for non-payment of child support, at the Kemp Housing Authority in Kemp, Texas, June 12, 2012. For several years now, more rural towns across the country, including in Texas, have been closing their police departments because they can't afford them anymore.

That happened May 9. Since then, according to sheriff's department spokeswoman Pat Laney, deputies responded to 89 calls through June 8.

During roughly the same period last year, she said, Kemp police officers responded to 166 calls. She said the one-month snapshot doesn't point up any significant problems as far as crime goes.

"Obviously we had to move some personnel around to get people there," she said, noting that the sheriff's department has 98 licensed deputies — and 36 that patrol the county, which includes the larger cities of Forney and Terrell.

Some places that eliminated their police forces saw a sudden

rise in vandalism, illegal drugs and other crimes. But city and county officials have said they don't expect that to happen in Kemp.

However, a day after the Kemp City Council disbanded the force, two businesses were burglarized — and some residents are still expressing concern about a future without a police department.

"Why didn't they just cut back?" said Anona Atterton, owner of the Sun Patch, a secondhand clothes and furniture store. "The police officers know this city better than anybody. They know where the illegal drug houses are (and) where the kids play on the streets."

Brewer and many of her regu-

lar patrons agreed.

"I think the decision they made was a wrong decision," Brewer said.

Other Kemp residents and business owners, however, said they understand the decision because city officials are scrambling to come up with funds to address all of the town's basic needs. Last summer, because of a drought that exposed the town's aging water system, burst water pipes drained Kemp's water supply and shut down its system for three days.

Now, residents say, they have to swallow an unpleasant choice — no police department or no water.

Pat Hanna, 84, said city officials had to save money somewhere.

"There just comes a time when you've got to make a choice," he said.

Hanna said he believes if the town can get along without a police force for a while, it might be better off in the long run.

Colleen Busby agreed. And Busby happens to be the owner of one of the businesses — Sac-a-Burger — that was burglarized after the police department was shut down.

"I was shocked when they got rid of everybody," Busby said. "But I do support the decision because it came down to: Do you want to get rid of the police department or have water?"

"We can't have both. Can we survive without a police department? Yes. Can we survive without water? No."

Neither the town's mayor, Donald Kile, nor the city administrator, Charles Fenner, who was hired shortly before the police

department was eliminated, returned phone calls or emails to discuss the town's budget woes or, more pointedly, how much money was saved by eliminating the police department.

Some Kemp residents suggested the elected officials were lying low to avoid political heat.

"Nobody likes to be without a police department of any kind," said Mickie Hooten, owner of a small boutique gift store. "I've never had to call them, but it's nice to know they're here."

Hooten said she can't understand why the city's water problems were allowed to linger to the point that the town had to eliminate the entire police force.

"The water has nothing to do with the police department," she said.

Politics aside, the reality is that small towns around the nation have been searching for ways to trim services they can't afford.

And law enforcement agencies often feel the brunt of the belt tightening, said Elaine Deck, senior program manager of the Smaller Law Enforcement Agency Technical Assistance Program for the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

While some smaller agencies have disbanded, many others have pooled resources with nearby cities or created regional agencies to better absorb the ebb and flow of the economy and keep costs in check.

Deck said folks who study law enforcement trends aren't as worked up over the recent decline in small-town departments "because they see the overall number fluctuate up and down all the time."

Remains Of Second Person Found In Colorado Fire Wreckage

BY P. SOLOMON BANDA AND THOMAS PEIPERT
Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Firefighters searching for bodies in smoldering piles of the nearly 350 homes burned to the ground by the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history found a second body Friday at a residence where another person was found dead earlier.

As crews on the front lines made slow but steady progress against the flames, Police Chief Pete Carey said fewer than 10 people altogether were unaccounted for. The remains of one person were found Thursday in what was left standing of one home. He confirmed that the remains of a second person who lived there were found Friday.

The 26-square-mile blaze — one of several wildfires burning out of control across the tinder-dry West — was reported to be 25 percent contained, and authorities began lifting some of the evacuation orders for the more than 30,000 people who fled their homes a few days ago.

After growing explosively earlier in the week, the fire gained no ground overnight, authorities reported Friday. And the weather was clear and mostly calm, a welcome break from the lightning and high wind that drove the flames.

"The focus for today is to hold what we got," extend the fire lines to contain more of the blaze, and bring in more heavy equipment, said Rich Harvey, incident commander for the fire.

Exhausted firefighters fresh off the front lines described the devastation in some neighborhoods and the challenges of battling such a huge blaze.

"It looks like hell. I would imagine it felt like a nuclear bomb went off. There was fire everywhere. Everything had a square shape to it because it was foundations," said Rich Rexach, who had been working 12-hour days since Tuesday, when flames swept through neighborhoods in this city of more than 400,000 people 60 miles south of Denver.

"Everything you put water on, it was just swallowing it," he said.

President Barack Obama toured the stricken areas Friday after issuing a disaster declaration for Colorado that frees up federal funds. He thanked firefighters and other emergency workers, saying: "The country is grateful for your work. The country's got your back."

As residents waited anxiously to see what was left of their homes, police reported several burglaries in evacuated areas, along with break-ins of cars packed with evacuees' possessions outside hotels.

Community leaders began notifying residents Thursday that their homes were destroyed. Lists of the heavily damaged streets were posted at a high school, and residents scanned the sheets, but for many, the notification was a formality. They had already recognized their streets on the aerial pictures that appeared in the news.

"The blanket that was on my bed when I grew up, a bunch of things my mother had made," said Rick Spraycar, listing what

he lost when his house in the hard-hit Mountain Shadows subdivision burned down. "It's hard to put it into words. Everything I owned. Memories."

For Ernie Storti the pain of knowing that his was one of a handful of homes spared in his neighborhood was hard.

"Our home was standing, and everything south of us was gone," he said as tears streamed down his face outside a Red Cross Shelter where he had met with insurance agents.

Authorities were still trying to figure out what caused the fire. They said conditions were too dangerous to allow them in to start their investigation.

More than 1,000 personnel and six helicopters were fighting the fire.

All eight Air Force firefighting planes from four states will be at Colorado Springs' Peterson Air Force Base Saturday and available to fight the fire, marking the first time the entire fleet has been activated since 2008, Col. Jerry Champlin said.

Among the fires elsewhere in the West:

— At least 60 homes near Pocatello, Idaho, burned in a fast-moving wildfire that started Thursday evening. The blaze covered more than 1 1/2 square miles. Officials said it was human-caused but gave no details.

— A 70-square-mile wildfire in Utah destroyed at least 160 structures, more than 50 of them primary homes. Another blaze in Utah doubled in size to 70 square miles and was threatening about

75 structures.

Blazes also burned in Wyoming and Montana.

Authorities battling six wildfires in Utah said Colorado was taking most of the available fire crews, leaving them short-handed.

Fire commander Cheto Olais said leaders at one Utah blaze had requested about 200 additional firefighters but will probably get no more than 20. "A lot of assets are going to Colorado," Olais said.

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