

Crisfield Must Have LEOPS

Greetings! My name is Darlene Taylor and I am the newly elected Mayor of Crisfield, first African American and first female to be elected. I was born and raised in this community, spent 20 years in DC working for a major defense contractor, returned home to start a youth non-profit, It Takes Village to Help Our Children. Highly engaged in my community. I was sworn in as mayor on June 22, 2022 and one of the first stories I heard was about our need to recruit and retain good police officers. We only had 6 out of 12 slots filled.

A big part of the problem I was told was because our Department was not able to participate in LEOPS because we are in a non-contributory retirement plan. I was told that it is almost impossible to get and keep good officers and I was told a story that opened my eyes to the urgency of our problem:

J.P. a 34 year veteran on our police force is a hometown hero, we went to the same high school and everyone in the community knows, loves, and respects him as 'good policeman'. Turns out, if J.P. retires tomorrow, after 34 years of service, he would only receive about \$1100 a month in retirement. For me and everyone I tell this story to, that is totally unacceptable. An officer who gets up everyday, puts on the uniform, and puts his life on the line to protect our citizens, deserves more than a pittance. J.P.'s story is a human story, he says he never left our force because he loves Crisfield. He has 4 sons, the youngest is 17, so he would like to retire someday in the not too distant future. His oldest son is special needs, so J.P. will still be responsible for his care. His retirement is a big deal and we must honor his service and his sacrifice by making sure, it is something he can at least survive on.

Unfortunately, the City being in a non-contributory plan was based on a flawed leadership decision made many years ago, that has to be corrected. It's impacts are far and wide in trying to recruit and retain quality police officers in today's environment.

Our Police Chief, Rick Taylor has been on the Crisfield Police Department for 17 years. He became Chief in April of last year, 2022, after the previous Chief left for a better opportunity.

Crisfield is slated to have 12 police officers, but as of today, we only have 7, including the Chief.

Many times we only have one officer on duty, the community knows we are short staffed so that poses an additional safety risk for our citizens.

With only one officer on duty, if he has to run a prisoner to the detention center or any other issues, the Somerset County Sheriff's Office is often called in to fill in for us

Recruitment and Retention is almost impossible without a decent retirement plan

- The Chief came in at badge #133, we are currently at badge #177 so we have seen 39 people come and go since he was hired, for a small force like ours that's a lot of turnover
- In the last year we lost 4 Officers who left because of the opportunity to have LEOPS – Even though we offer less pay, Officers say they enjoy working here because they like the people and the job, but they need the retirement (Officers who have left say they miss the camaraderie)

- Chief reached out to other officers for referrals and was told that although they knew of officers interested in applying to other agencies, they would not come to the Crisfield Department because we do not have LEOPS

But not just any officers, we need the ability to recruit and retain quality officers:

- We have a standing vacancy notice and in the last year we have processed 5 people for hire and have not been able to on-board any of them for various personnel issues
- It is extremely difficult to locate and hire minority officers, there have been 3 in the pipeline but we have major difficulty getting them through the process, the fact that other departments offer LEOPS has been a factor, as well
- Interested applicants are aware of the value and always ask during the interview process, do we have LEOPS? it is in many cases a deciding factor

Competition for hire is fierce in our small rural area, the majority of the surrounding law enforcement agencies offer LEOPS, including:

- Princess Anne Police, UMES Police, Somerset Sheriff's Office, Fruitland Police, Pocomoke Police Departments
- Mostly recently we hired a certified minority officer who was returning to service and we completed the entire process except review of his personnel file at the Princess Anne Police department, once alerted that we were hiring the individual who was returning to service, the Princess Anne Police department hired him out from under us the next day, they were able to offer him re-enrollment in LEOPS

LEOPS is not a cure all for all of our recruitment and retention issues, but it will help us level the playing field, and we are asking for your help in not only leveling that playing field but also, supporting the officers who despite this major disparity have continued to stay in Crisfield and support our citizens.