

EDITORIAL: Fresno Police Department is on the right track



The arrest of former Fresno Deputy Police Chief Keith Foster on federal drug-trafficking charges has caused some in the community to question Chief Jerry Dyer's leadership.

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Trust between residents and police officers is the foundation of a safe city. People must trust that officers will treat them fairly and do everything in their power to protect them from violence and other crimes.

But it's a two-way street: Officers best perform their difficult jobs when they have the full support of law-abiding community members. It is our view that the Fresno Police Department has earned such support.

However, the arrest of then Deputy Police Chief Keith Foster on federal drug-trafficking charges last month has caused some in the community to question the performance of the department; in particular, the leadership of Police Chief Jerry Dyer.

Such questions are a natural reaction to such an arrest as shocking as Foster's, especially since he was promoted into the department's highest ranks by Dyer. Tough questions must be asked — to get at the truth and to identify mistakes so that Fresno PD and the public won't have to endure the stain of another Keith Foster in the future.

This is why we were eager to learn what Richard "Rick" Rasmussen would say about Foster's arrest. Since becoming Fresno's independent police auditor in September 2012, the former FBI supervisory special agent has

provided frank and well-reasoned reviews of the department's performance.

For example, two years ago, he stated that some police officers may be firing their weapons too many times during officer-involved shootings, thus increasing the danger to fellow officers and residents. Rasmussen discussed his findings with department leaders, internal affairs members and firearms trainers. He also visited the firearms-training center and reported to the public that he was confident that necessary changes were being made.

Rasmussen's read of the Foster arrest is this: There should be a study of promotion policies, an independent inspection of each department unit and more internal discussion of each officer's ethical obligations. His recommendations are backed by Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin and City Manager Bruce Rudd. Dyer told The Bee's George Hostetter that he didn't "see a problem" with the recommendations.

In the same quarterly report issued Tuesday morning, Rasmussen noted that the department hasn't had an officer-involved shooting since Oct. 20, 2014. Wrote Rasmussen: "This is remarkable, as the city has averaged nearly one a month for the past number of years. (The Office of Independent Review) recognizes that this trend is a combination of good work, increased training and the willingness of FPD to focus on de-escalation as their initial approach."

Rasmussen goes on to state, "In a time of national news speaking about ever improper uses of force, officer-involved shootings and other related issues, the FPD is headed in the opposite direction."

Even before tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere, Dyer had begun equipping officers with body cameras and taken the first steps toward returning to community-based policing. Violent crime has fallen four consecutive years, traffic fatalities have been cut by half, and all of Fresno's officers have completed mental-health training.

These are facts that Fresnans should give considerable weight to while contemplating what Foster's arrest signifies about the Fresno Police Department. Is the department perfect? No. Officers are human. And sometimes people who shouldn't be assigned a gun and a badge are able to fool the screeners during the hiring process. Some of them even fool their fellow officers and superiors for a long time before being exposed.

Yes, we will need more answers about the Foster situation and more details about changes that should be made. But we shouldn't lose sight of this truth: Fresnans are safer today than they have been in several years because of the efforts of their police department.

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