

Fresno police auditor: Leadership candidates should show their finances

By George Hostetter
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More sunlight on personal finances and more on-the-job training for future leaders top the police auditor's recommendations for Fresno's embattled Police Department.

Rick Rasmussen in his second-quarter report alternates between praise for the department's dramatic reduction in officer-involved shootings and detailed ideas for ensuring that only the best cops rise to positions of command authority.

Mark Scharman, an expert analyst recently added to the Office of Independent Review's staff, helped write the 27-page report.

[Read the report](#)

The key recommendations include:

- Deputy police chief candidates must submit financial disclosure forms.
- Potential conflicts of interest among these candidates should be uncovered during interviews with the chief.
- The same rules apply to candidates for commander (a new rank yet to be approved), captain and lieutenant.
- A new program called the Community Engagement Unit should be created.
- This unit would consist of officers on the eligible sergeant roster.
- The unit's members would routinely engage with residents and groups on public-safety issues, thus building leadership skills and a pool of talent from which future chiefs are likely to emerge.

"The recommendations are solid," City Manager Bruce Rudd said. "They merit future review."

Officers are taking that deep breath before they make that decision.

Fresno Police Auditor Rick Rasmussen on the recent dramatic decline in officer-involved shootings.

Rasmussen said a department that several years ago was averaging about one officer-involved shooting per month has cut that figure to just one in the last nine months.

"That's a huge accomplishment for the department and especially for the rank-and-file," Rasmussen said.

Police Chief Jerry Dyer said the report is thorough and innovative.

"Conceptually, I agree with everything in there," Dyer said.

Practicality is something else, the chief said. The recommendations now work their way through the usual process of study by mayor, city manager, city council, police union and public.

Their import lies in large part in recent events both local and national.

Keith Foster, then one of the department's four deputy police chiefs, was arrested in March on federal drug charges. He pleaded not guilty and retired from the force.

[The Bee this month](#) published a detailed investigation into officer-involved shootings for the past three-and-a-half years, with a focus on a period of two-plus years in which gun play is alleged by critics to have been routine. The city faces a plate full of excessive-force lawsuits.

And it's no secret in this digital age that controversial police actions in states such as Missouri, Maryland and New York have strained, if not snapped, the bond between officer and citizen.

In the wake of Foster's arrest, Mayor Ashley Swearingin, Rudd and Dyer turned to the Office of Independent Review.

Their charge had specifics, such as conducting a review of Police Department hiring policies and promotion practices.

More generally, their charge to Rasmussen was a plea to help City Hall get a handle on messaging. There was an unmistakable fear among city officials that public emotion, if not political demagoguery, would overwhelm perception of what they see as an effective police department.

The Rasmussen-Scharman report released on Monday is part of the administration's response.

Rasmussen in a City Hall interview described the eye-opening decline in officer-involved shootings as a "shift" in the relationship between officer and civilian. He would only guess at the shift's cause.

Perhaps the public is more aware of reciprocal responsibilities and therefore less confrontational, Rasmussen said. Perhaps officers are more aware of their ability to de-escalate tensions early in an incident, he said. Perhaps, he added, it's a little of both.

One officer-involved-shooting in nine months is "unprecedented," Rasmussen said.

Scharman in the same interview made no mention of Foster while discussing the wisdom of financial-disclosure requirements for leadership candidates. But it was Foster's financial troubles, almost as much as the arrest itself, that shocked Fresno last spring.

[The Bee reviewed public records](#) to discover that Foster, pulling down nearly \$15,000 a month in gross pay, had battled a mountain of debt (back taxes, credit cards) and obligations (spousal/child support payments) for years. Yet, city officials after the arrest said that, not only were they stunned to learn that Foster allegedly was part of a ring to distribute oxycodone, heroin and marijuana, but there was no earthly way they could have smelled potential trouble.

Some Fresnoans refused to buy the excuse.

Scharman said Fresno currently doesn't require a candidate for a top leadership spot to jump through the same disclosure hoops faced by the average consumer trying to buy a couch on credit.

This police department is one of the best in the country.

Independent Auditor Mark Scharman

That should change, Scharman said.

"Our conduct has to be above reproach if we're going to have the trust of the community," Scharman said.

Longer-term, the community engagement unit may be the most significant Rasmussen-Scharman idea.

Among avid City-Hall watchers, the most serious consequence of Foster's arrest was what it said about passing the torch. Dyer in August celebrates his 14th anniversary as chief. Among his most important duties in a government that prefers to find its chiefs in-house is grooming his successor.

Yet, for a variety of reasons, it appears in hindsight that none of the four deputy chiefs on the payroll in early March was ever destined to be serious candidates for the chief's job, at least to any degree of longevity.

"The Community Engagement Unit will be staffed with the future leaders of our police department, providing the unit with some of the best and brightest in our organization," the police auditor's report said.

In a nutshell, the unit will consist of officers eligible to make the jump to sergeant. This by itself means the cops have leadership ambitions. Officers in the unit will be actively involved in meeting with Fresnans to discuss concerns and find answers.

These young officers would begin climbing that greasy pole of institutional success, all the while learning about the complexities of proactive policing in a democratic society. The unit would provide both a steady supply of young leaders and an incessant test to weed out the weak.

"They're either going to perform or melt," Scharman said.

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