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FINANCE

THE CITY OF DUBUQUE, IOWA

Addressing the Hiring Crisis for the City of Dubuque through Collaboration

BY CONNOR GOLDEN AND SAMUEL MANN

As is the case for many local governments, the City of Dubuque, Iowa, has faced serious staffing challenges over the last three years. The combination of a year-long COVID-19 hiring freeze, increased attrition, and a particularly tight labor market have forced city officials to get creative as they try to work their way back to pre-pandemic staffing levels without decreasing the quality of their services. Thankfully, Dubuque's city leaders understand the power of collaboration and are up to the task.

Mike Van Milligen has been Dubuque's city manager for 30 years. He started his career as a police officer for the City of Carbondale, Illinois, and later became assistant village manager for the Village

of Skokie, Illinois, before stepping into his role with the City of Dubuque, where he oversees nearly 30 departments with a total of 750 full-time equivalents or 1,100 employees.

Jenny Larson is the chief financial officer in the city's Finance Department. With approximately 20 employees, the Finance Department oversees Budget, Payroll, Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable, miscellaneous billing, and utility billing for Sewer, Water, Stormwater, and Refuse. Jenny has been with the city for 17 years. In March 2019, the Budget and Finance departments were combined, and she was promoted to manage the newly merged department.

Amy Scheller was hired as Dubuque's fire chief in 2021, and she directs six fire

stations and 103 full-time employees. She has been in the fire service for almost 30 years. Starting as a volunteer firefighter, she worked her way up to paid on-call status while in college. She then worked full-time at a municipal fire department in Illinois, moving through the ranks from firefighter paramedic to company officer.

Jeremy Jensen has been the city's chief of police for a little more than one year, leading a department of 115 authorized and sworn officers, along with eight civilian employees and eight interns. He has more than 30 years of experience in law enforcement and spent most of his career with the City of Dubuque as he made his way through the ranks.

City Manager's Office

Dubuque has shown remarkable resilience by embracing innovative solutions and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Van Milligan sheds light on the proactive measures taken to address the challenges he faced during the pandemic to ensure a sustainable future for the city.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, the economic outlook seemed uncertain, prompting a cautious approach. Instead of resorting to layoffs, the city implemented a hiring freeze. Although necessary at the time, this decision resulted in a backlog of vacant positions across departments, particularly in public safety. As the true impact of the pandemic became evident, however, the mayor and city council recognized the need to adapt, and they identified key priorities during their annual goal-setting session.

The first priority identified was retaining existing employees and acknowledging their invaluable experience and dedication. The second was recruiting new employees to fill the vacant positions and maintain essential city services. By emphasizing these goals, Dubuque aimed to ensure continuity and stability in its workforce.

To demonstrate their commitment, the mayor and council approved changes to union contracts and ensured that all city employees would receive a pay increase of 5 percent instead of the 3 percent initially guaranteed. In recognition of their exceptional service, the Police, Fire, and 911 Emergency Communications departments received a 6 percent pay increase.

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JENNY LARSON
CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER,
CITY OF DUBUQUE

Furthermore, the city took a significant step by introducing a new policy known as “recognition leave.” Each employee was granted 40 hours of recognition leave, which could be used for time off or converted into compensation upon retirement or separation from the city. Dubuque also recognized Juneteenth as an additional paid holiday as part of its commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

Finally, to ensure fair and competitive compensation, Dubuque authorized a pay-in-class study, currently underway and set to conclude in December 2023. This study assesses the pay structure of every position in the city government and compares it to comparable cities in the State of Iowa. By conducting this analysis, Dubuque aims to ensure that its remuneration aligns with market standards, allowing the city to attract and retain talented individuals who contribute to the city's growth and development.

Finance Department

The Finance Department has not been immune to the city's staffing challenges, which has led to increased workloads for staff members and the need for external support. Larson describes the journey of filling crucial vacancies and implementing strategic restructuring measures to address these challenges.

The Finance Department's staffing issues first began during an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system implementation, a lengthy project initiated before the pandemic. Several employees resigned before the system went live, and the assistant finance director resigned just after, resulting in a total of four vacancies. While the lower-level positions were filled relatively quickly, finding a new assistant finance director proved challenging.

The city initially attempted to fill this position using existing hiring processes through the Human Resources Department. They extended three offers to candidates, but each time, the candidates' current employers promoted them or offered bonuses to dissuade the candidate from leaving. Finally, the city was forced to engage an external recruiter, and the position was finally filled after almost 12 months.

During this time, Larson also proposed restructuring the Finance Department to address gaps revealed by these vacancies. In January 2023, the city council approved her restructuring plan, which included creating three new positions: a finance director, a budget director, and a purchasing and safety coordinator. This time the city decided to use external recruiters from the



Mike Van Milligan
Dubuque City Manager



Jenny Larson
Chief Financial Officer



Amy Scheller
Dubuque Fire Chief



Jeremy Jensen
Dubuque Chief of Police



start, but it still took almost six months to fill these newly created positions.

These prolonged vacancies and additional staffing challenges, such as parental leave for two staff members and the recent resignation of an accountant, have placed significant stress on the department. To relieve some of this pressure and ensure that services continue uninterrupted, the department has increasingly relied on consulting firms and contracting temporary employees. Additionally, the former assistant finance director, who now works for one of the consulting firms hired by the Finance Department, continues to contribute part-time, helping manage responsibilities previously handled by the departing accountant.

Through these challenges, the Finance Department has instituted numerous changes designed to encourage retention and boost recruitment. Understanding that flexible work schedules are an attractive perk to employees, the Finance Department adjusted its hours to allow staff to work a short day on Fridays. It also started providing the opportunity for most staff members to work from home two days a week.

In a creative attempt to increase its applicant pool, the city also recently changed its residency requirements. Before the change, candidates were required to live in Iowa and within a few miles of city limits. The new residency requirements allow candidates to live in any state if they are within 30 miles of the city limits. Given Dubuque's location across the Mississippi

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AMY SCHELLER
FIRE CHIEF, CITY OF DUBUQUE

River from the border of the states of Illinois and Wisconsin, this change has dramatically increased the area from which candidates can apply.

Fire Department

Dubuque's Fire Department has also been grappling with recruitment challenges in recent years. Scheller discusses efforts to enhance diversity, adapt to changing trends in the profession, and secure a strong workforce.

Recently, the department has experienced a decline in the number of candidates on their recruitment lists and a significant drop in candidate test numbers. Despite this, Scheller recognizes the continuing importance of diversity, and she actively participates in diverse workforce and recruitment teams.

To overcome these challenges and widen its candidate pool, the Fire Department has embraced innovative strategies—with the city's full support. One

notable example involves hiring emergency medical technicians. Traditionally, the Dubuque Fire Department has only hired trained paramedics; however, the Fire Department has recently begun allowing EMTs to apply for entry-level roles alongside paramedics. This switch expanded the pool of qualified candidates and has resulted in multiple successful hires. The collaboration between EMTs and experienced paramedics within the department ensures comprehensive training and support for new recruits.

Another positive development for the Fire Department's recruitment involves “over-hiring.” Candidates who made it onto the recruitment list would often face long waiting periods because of limited hiring capacity. As a result, the city often lost promising recruits to cities that could hire them sooner. Recognizing an opportunity, the department was recently granted approval to “over-hire.” This change allows more individuals on the list to enter the profession right away, ensuring that Dubuque can compete for talented recruits and provide greater opportunities for aspiring firefighters.

Scheller highlights the competitive nature of recruitment within a limited pool of candidates. With creative strategies such as signing bonuses and increased recruitment efforts observed in other organizations, Dubuque's Fire Department is taking proactive steps to attract and retain talented individuals. The department is also mindful that 10 to 15 members will retire within the next few years, so it is preparing to address the resulting workforce gaps.



Police Department

Although many departments across the city have experienced staffing issues, none has felt the same level of pain as the Police Department. Jensen describes the events of the past three years as a “perfect storm” that has deeply affected his staff.

In 2020, Dubuque’s Police Department was on the cusp of achieving full staffing when unforeseen circumstances struck. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the demanding nature of public safety work, as officers were often exposed to a deadly virus that we knew very little about. In addition to this stress, the nationwide impact of the Black Lives Matter movement resulted in officer fatigue and a negative public perception of policing. The two forces combined were overwhelming for many active and prospective officers, leading to increased officer attrition and a decreased applicant pool. Finally, the preference for regular work schedules and the desire to start in specialized roles posed challenges in attracting qualified candidates. As a result, the Police Department has 15 open positions.

The legal requirements that go along with the officer recruitment process also present significant obstacles. State-sanctioned police academies have limited seats available, and of the candidates that Dubuque’s Police Department is able to send to the academy, only 30 percent end up passing the state-mandated written and physical exams. Additionally,

recruits must undergo a background check, psychological examination, physical examination, and 20 weeks of field training. When all is said and done, it takes a full year to replace a retiring officer. The limited capacity for field training further compounds this issue, as the department struggles to train enough new hires due to a shortage of field training officers.

The department also faces discontent about pay disparities, as compared to other agencies such as the neighboring sheriff’s office. These disparities have resulted in officers feeling undervalued and frustrated.

Despite these complex issues, Dubuque’s Police Department is actively creating a more stable and rewarding work environment for law enforcement professionals. Recently the department was able to get a city clerk trained and certified in scoring candidates’ tests. This allows the department to evaluate candidates more often, which not only decreases the time required to hire a new officer but also decreases the burden placed on field training officers by spreading out when new hires join the force.

Additionally, recognizing the burden felt by the officers training new recruits, the Police Department has prioritized the retention of its field training officers. On top of the 6 percent raises received by all Dubuque police officers, the Police Department recently provided field training officers with an additional raise.

Advice from Dubuque

Having faced his own fair share of roadblocks, Jensen knows how crucial it is to “identify what you actually have control over and what you don’t have control over.” Making this distinction clear can help managers avoid frustration and focus on recognizing actions they can take to improve their situation, no matter how marginally.

Scheller recognizes that her department is at an inflection point, saying, “If we continue to do things the way we have done them in the past, we are not going to succeed. Creating an environment where creativity and collaborative problem-solving are encouraged is going to be a game-changer. I’m hoping that the way I manage and the way I treat people will trickle down to the other leaders of this department.”

Larson offers advice for other finance departments that are struggling with retention and recruitment centers on listening. “It’s important to listen to staff members and their needs, as well as candidates who are stressing the importance of work-life balance. That is not going to change, so we need to change as an organization to meet that need. Hybrid working, flex schedules, and vacations are all coming up as I have been going through interviews in the Finance Department. You just need to keep an open mind. What we offer today may not be what is needed in the future.” ■

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