

On June 15, 2022, the Lynnwood Times interviewed Snohomish County Sheriff Adam Fortney regarding staffing shortages, the dissolution of the Office of Neighborhoods, and the importance of transparency. The following is a transcript of that interview that has been slightly edited for clarity purposes. Listen to the full interview at [Lynnwoodtimes.com](https://lynnwoodtimes.com).

Q: Before we get into the nitty gritty, because we will be talking about staffing shortages, could you give us a brief synopsis of your department? How many staff members and commissioned officers there are, that sort of thing? (00:51)

SHERIFF FORTNEY: *In 2021, again, part of the last couple of years have been tough for law enforcement. We were able to set a record for hiring for deputy sheriffs. We hired 36—that's just deputies. I'm not talking about corrections or the civilian side. And it wasn't a full calendar year because of the hiring freeze. It took us several months to ramp up background investigations, polygraphs—we have to do all that kind of stuff. So I was very pleased with 2021, although it's kind of chaotic for everybody. We did really well with hiring.*

That's why [when] I came into 2022, I felt optimistic about where we were at and some people didn't, didn't like that, but I was optimistic looking at the big picture of our agency with the people leaving and the people we've been able to hire, especially in 21.

So, that lasted for a few months. I don't share that anymore, and that's because we have to look at what is going on at the Sheriff's Office in the here and now. And in the first six months, we have lost 30 deputies—so that's commissioned—and we have hired 16. You can do the math on that and it doesn't add up. So what we have to do—we have to plan and try to predict the best we can for the coming future, right? Six, 12, 18 months.

Well if we carry on that same mathematical pattern, we're in a tough spot in a year, 18 months from now. Now, I hope we recover completely. And you're sitting here six months from now, we're having a different conversation about all the people we're able to hire. But I at least have to take that—what we're seeing right now into consideration, and that leads into the moves we made and things like that.

So we've lost 30 we've hired 16. The math doesn't add up. And then for comparison purposes, 30 people leaving the sheriff's office in six months is unheard of. Typically we would see that [in] [an] 18-month period and most of those, you know, with retirements and things we can plan for. There's always a surprise every now and then and that's OK. But we've never seen it on this scale.

I mean, I've got a very experienced command staff, Chief Richardson has been doing this—I think 46 years he's been in the profession. All of us agree, we've never seen anything like it in law enforcement right now. So that's where we're at.

Q: So, today then, how many deputies are there total employed in the Office? (03:18)

So, sergeants and deputies, that's typically a number I refer to. And those are the ones that are on the street, for the most part, there's a couple there. We run about 242 to 250. I got to be honest, I don't know the exact number today of where we're at. And, you know, it changes daily. That's why I try to be so careful with my numbers and because you can check back in a week and it might be different—they literally change that quick.

Every retirement or resignation and every hire comes across my desk in the form of a memo and I initial it, right? And so I just did two this morning and the first one was a new hire. 'Oh, good. We got someone new. That's great!' The next one was someone leaving. I'm like, 'Oh, gosh.' And he's a really great young man. But that's just the kind of the world we're in right now.

Q: Out of the 30 who left in the last six months, how many of those, if you can share, how many of those do you think were retirements, and how many of those [were hired laterally at a different department]? (04:11)

What we're losing is the 10 to 15-year deputy sheriff, and that's a lot of experience in there. And I would say—I could get you the exact numbers if you want to follow up—but I don't have them off the top of my head. But the overwhelming majority of what we're seeing right now is just people, if they're leaving the profession of law enforcement and staying local, they're going to the private sector. They just don't want to do this job anymore. OK? And that's that runs the gamut of experience.

And then the other part that we're seeing, and this is what's hurting, is cops are leaving the profession. And if they're staying in the profession, I should say, they're going to different states. We have lost people to Montana, Idaho, South Dakota, Wyoming, Arizona, Florida, and one to upstate New York. While all of them, on an individual level, may have their own personal reasons, the theme is 'We just don't want to be a police officer in the state of Washington anymore.' It's just it's been a tough two and a half years.

Q: Why do you think it is not as, perhaps, preferable for some officers to work in Washington State? (05:19)

It's because when we have the majority of a state government, and you can figure out who I mean by that, that demeans the profession for two and a half years, OK, especially in 2020 and 2021, you can only take so much as a human being. I mean, forget the law enforcement [component]. I mean, we're talking about cops, that's what you're here [for] today—but any profession.

What if they came after journalists and passed a whole bunch of accountability bills against journalists, right? And journalism ethics and things like that. You could maybe get uncomfortable, like, 'Well, I'm going to go to a different state where I'm supported, then, in journalism.' Right? 'And they're going to support my right to practice good journalism. That's a good thing.' So whatever profession it may be, that's just what we're seeing.

And I described it the other night, and I stand by this, is there's risk versus reward in this profession and any profession. We put this uniform on, we get in these cars and we go out. We know there's a risk there. That's what we saw in Everett a couple months back. We could not come home.

We all accept that when we do this job, and that's OK. But when the majority of a state government, I would say either demeans the profession, calls you racist for a couple of years, and I say comes it comes after a profession, you just reach a point where that risk starts to outweigh the reward. The reward being, I think we're all in this to serve the community, and we're in this to provide a living for our families. Right. Well, people can go do that elsewhere right now.

It's a great market for cops. If you want to go [out] there, they're hiring everywhere, all across the country. And if someone wants to go somewhere where maybe, maybe it's just their perception, but they feel more supported by their elected officials in different states—what we're seeing is they're going there and doing that. We have never seen that before in history at the sheriff's office here.

Q: Could you elaborate more on the rationale leading up to the decision to reassign special unit officers to patrol? (07:52)

I'm sure when we did make the announcement, it sounded sudden. It wasn't it wasn't sudden. We've been dealing with for months, really a couple of years now. But the last six months is in the forefront and we made incremental decisions leading up to that one, which I would describe as less impactful to our people and our agency and our community because I feel obligated as the sheriff not to just suddenly make a decision like that. There needs to be thought behind it and it needs to be, well, what I would say is the right thing to do.

And so we tried incremental changes and a couple months went by, and then they just flat out weren't working. It was not enough of a change to make a difference for our people at the patrol level right now in Snohomish County. In addition to that, society has become seemingly more violent. Let me explain that a little bit.

We had we as a command staff get notified when a deputy's injured or [of a] major incident. So it could be on the weekends, it could be after hours. We get what we call a command staff notification. I received several of those over the course of about six weeks or so, and we had one deputy punched in the face. We had two sent to the hospital because of fentanyl fumes. We had two deputies from Office of Neighborhoods involved in [what's] described as a 'fight for life,' an ongoing prolonged fight at Airport 99. And then we had a deputy go to the hospital, I think it was two Fridays ago because of a fight at, actually, the exact same location of that other one.

In the midst of all of that, there are what [are called] our 'help the officer call' or Code Threes. There were three of them, and in my 25 years of working patrol, I'm sure there's been more, but

what I have heard, you know, full-time deputy sheriff for 25 years, I've heard three, and have had to respond to three of them.

Three in a month—we need to sit down and look [at this] as a command staff. 'OK, what, what are we doing? How can we make this safer for our people and how can we make this safer for the community?' And, again, we did all the incremental stuff—smaller changes, less impactful to our people. And I'll, I'm going to have to ask him if this OK, but I'm going to quote the undersheriff so you have the context here. When that last deputy was injured in the fight at Airport 99, he went to the hospital, OK? And that was kind of the last of a series of these happening.

The undersheriff responded from home, it was after hours, to go check on the deputy and see how he's doing. And he talked to the sergeant out there, and we made sure the sergeant was doing everything that we asked of him, which means mandating overtime, keeping people—we have what they call 'short days.' We don't have them anymore. We're making people work overtime. And the sergeant was like, 'Yep, I did all that.' Ian, the undersheriff, came back to me and goes, 'Adam, we're going to get somebody killed. We need to do something.'

Now, what he meant by that is the decisions stop at my desk. I am now aware of these safety components both for our deputies, and I would also involve the community in that, and especially in the last one, both of them, the Office of Neighborhoods one and the last deputy that that undersheriff visited. It took a while to get them back up. That's not acceptable.

Now, that's part of the risk we have. We accept that. In unincorporated Snohomish County, your backup, is not like in a small city, OK, but this was South County and we are struggling to get people because they're just they're always on calls. They're always busy. They're always doing something.

And staffing has been an issue for us, well historically, always, but, you know, our people have been screaming for more patrol staffing. And when the incremental changes didn't work and we still, what I felt was a safety component out there from these glaring examples, we felt we had to balance this.

The Office of Neighborhoods, K-9, and Directed Patrol all serve a purpose in the community. Those are the three that we put back in patrol. [Directed Patrol] I started. We had done it historically, but for the last five or six years, we hadn't been able to do it—[it's] very important to me that we do it. K-9 I'm personally passionate about and they're out there helping patrol anyway, but we revamped the unit.

The Office of Neighborhoods is the big one. [...] It's the most controversial. But when we're sitting down and talking about this as a command staff, and I have an undersheriff telling me someone's going to get killed—it's literally what he said—I have to consider the safety component. Are all three of these units very effective and serve a purpose in our community, a very valuable purpose? Absolutely. 100%.

But if I can't keep deputies safe and have them safely respond to 911 calls for service in our community—which will never go away for us, that's our bread and butter, we have to be able to do that—we have to make changes. Unfortunately, there were some fairly drastic changes and we felt, although effective, the safety is going to trump that every single time.

So we could talk about any specialty unit. They all serve a purpose. They are worthwhile. But these are three that we could make an impact almost immediately, within a few weeks, get them back on patrol, helping with the 911 calls for service. So we felt that was the right thing to do. We felt we had to do it.

So I got to talk about Office of Neighborhoods real quick because this is probably what everybody is talking about. And so I want to talk about my support of office neighbors. I inherited this program. The former sheriff started it. I completely, 100% support it. Good on him for doing so, right? I have a choice as the sheriff, when I came into office—I didn't have to staff that. I could have cut it. I could have put them in K-9. I could have put them in patrol—that's my right as any elected sheriff would have. I didn't. Not only that, I kept it staffed.

What they are doing out in the community is so incredibly important. I just mentioned they're effective. They are very effective at what they do. And so I have supported it. A little behind the scenes, just a couple of months ago, we've really struggled with, when we do have an influx of people, getting them through our system, the background investigations. Everybody's burnt out right now. There's overtime. There's overtime for background investigations, and everybody's tired, ok?

I had a bureau chief come to me and say, 'Adam, I need someone doing full-time background for a period of time.' I think it was 30 days or something like that. I said, 'OK, well, let's find someone.' Their recommendation was someone in The Office of Neighborhoods because he's really good at the background stuff. I told him this was just two months ago, 'No, we are not touching off The Office of Neighborhoods, you can find someone else.' And we did, but you're not going to touch Office of Neighborhoods.

So I think people want to say, 'that Sheriff Fortney's not supportive of the Office of Neighborhoods and he didn't really need to cut it.' I'm telling the community, 'No, I absolutely had to do—we had to do this.' And I stand by the decision.

Q: You noted in the announcement and again during a Public Safety Town Hall in Marysville that services will still be available to those that need them in Snohomish County. Can you walk us through what's going to be happening now that the Office of Neighborhoods is dissolved? (14:15)

I don't know specifically, but number one, thank you for asking that question because it's a very important follow-up question because when people think, 'Oh, the sheriff cut the Office of Neighborhoods, that's just going away.' And I'm telling them in no uncertainty, that is not the

case. OK, you just told me that I said at the forum, 'if people need help in Snohomish County, we will get them help.' And I stand by that.

And so what we're going to do is—so the social workers work for Human Services. They don't work for me. So I have to walk a line here. I can't tell the social workers what to do. We just changed what their work product is going to look like because typically they'd be partnered with a deputy. We can't do that full-time right now. But I have a couple ideas, but those are my ideas. I got to make sure that Human Services is OK with that as well, and I haven't had that conversation yet.

I would prefer to have an Office of Neighborhoods as a full-time outreach team because I think it's streamlined. They're good at what they do. They do it every day, and that's what we want. But it's just not a perfect world right now. It's not, actually, we're in a tough spot, so we got to make do with what we have. And I actually think there might be some improvements we could make. I think anyway. And again, I have to vet this with Human Services, but we have the Diversion Center right across the street from where we're sitting.

And that's kind of a temporary place where people can go. So if someone in our community [who] accepts services, they say, 'I'm ready.' Right? [It's] very difficult to make that happen in a short period of time, like a 24 to 40 hour period, just not going to happen. We've solved that. We have the Diversion Center over here where we can house people and get them help. There's medical treatment there as well. While they're waiting for longer-term help, OK?

Right now, it's been our policy that our embedded social workers and the deputies paired with them in the Office of Neighborhoods would drive them to the Diversion Center and get them down that road, right? I'm here saying our work is not going away. We are still going to come across these people every single day. Every single day, right? People that need help in our community. Why can't any deputy sheriff just drive them to the Diversion Center and get them pointed in that direction?

I want to be able to work on that with Human Services and I hope they're open to that. And again, I stand by what I said at the beginning of this is that in the Sheriff's Office, meaning our patrol folks, whoever comes across people in need in our community, can be a conduit for people to get them at least pointed in the right direction, we are still going to do that. That is very important to me. I just have to have people to staff the road right now; to staff patrol.

But I think there's a way—I do. And again, there's some logistics we need to work out still, but the services aren't going away. If I have a patrol deputy that's not in the Office of Neighborhoods, he's working patrol and he wants to drive someone up to the Carnegie Building for services here, they are allowed to do that. They have a lot of freedom at the Sheriff's Office to do their job and use discretion.

The services aren't going away. Just specifically how the Sheriff's Office may be able to provide those or be that conduit is just going to change a little for the time being. Man, I tell you, if we're

six months from now and I'm like, 'I've solved the staffing shortage in law enforcement in Snohomish County in Washington the state,' we are going to fully staff Office of Neighborhoods again, right away. I just I can't commit to that today. We're just not in that position.

Q: To recap on the staffing shortage issue, the first contributing factor to the shortage that you mentioned was the sentiment of government leaders towards the profession, correct? (18:20)

Our elected representatives in Olympia. It has been outrageous what they have done to this profession. OK, I talk with police chiefs and sheriffs all over Snohomish County in Washington State. And in those conversations, I can guarantee you there is a consensus, [though] not everybody is willing to say that publicly. I am because I think it's true and I think it's real. You have the freedom to go talk to any deputy sheriff you want to and they'll tell you the same thing.

I don't think our elected officials, what I just got done talking about, reflect the greater community in Snohomish County I'm certain of and I would venture to say in Washington State. And I am out in the community probably more so than any sheriff I've worked for in 25 years, and I am talking to people all the time. And that's why I'm so confident in saying that, especially in Snohomish County.

Q: What would you say is the second contributing factor to the staffing shortage at the Sheriff's Office? (19:10)

It's all about recruitment and retention right now—retaining the people we have and recruiting new people to do the job. And so, like I mentioned, in 2021, we did great with getting new people to come in here, really well. Just we haven't sustained it in 2022. So you know, I read another local politician in a recent news report that said, 'Well, the academy classes are full, right? We're doing great! New kids want to come in and do this job.'

That's not a wrong assessment. They are running academies, they did increase classes. That's all a good thing. But you got to finish the sentence. If I have 30 leaving and I've hired 16 in a six-month period, the math doesn't add up. That's my whole point. So is it true that we are seeing a younger generation and new people come into this profession? Yes, absolutely.

While the new kids are great. It just—the math doesn't add up. We're losing more people than we're taking in. And that's what I'm trying to talk about. And that's what police chiefs and sheriffs all over the state are talking about right now.

Q: What would you say would be a third contributing factor to the staffing shortage? (20:28)

So I'll give you a specific one to us. we're struggling with a contract and pay right now. I know that's not a flashy topic to talk about, but the Sheriff's Office is historically well behind the cities, and it's just become progressively worse over the years.

We are bottom of the barrel when compared to Snohomish County police agencies. You can go to Everett PD and get a \$30,000 signing bonus today. We haven't seen a lot of people leave to PD—I think that reflects well on the Sheriff's Office. But we are in contract negotiations with Snohomish County right now for the Deputy Sheriffs Association, so that's deputies and sergeants and we're behind by quite a bit.

The deputies know it. They're not happy. People are grouchy right now, really grouchy and pay comes into it because they're looking at all the agencies around us that do the same job as us and make considerably more when you look at the wages, and then you multiply that over the course of a career and what that money could impact them in their lives and their families.

And it has impacted a couple people. Again, I stand by what I said about the vast majority leaving the profession, but we've seen a couple of them leave because of pay. I think it will help if we're able to settle this contract and get them a decent pay raise.

You could look at Pierce County because they literally just went through this and did a substantial contract because of all of the reasons that we just got done talking about. Theirs is ratified, it's done. They did the retention bonus so we are looking at all of that

How many people are going to take a job that's doing the same thing but pays considerably less? Not a whole lot would make that [decision], right? So we're trying to level that out a little bit.

Q: For the officers who have stayed with the Sheriff's Office, what do they like about working there? (23:13)

I think they like our culture. We have a culture here at the Sheriff's Office where we're not afraid to do police work. [That] hasn't been popular to say, like in the last couple of years we've been talking about. But we pride ourselves in trusting our people and giving them discretion to do their job. There are some police agencies in the state where you have to call a sergeant before you make an arrest or a booking and things like that. We don't do anything like that.

We put people through a rigorous testing process and we only hire the best. So when they get out there, we should trust them to do their job. We give them a gun, we give them a badge. So they have a lot of authority in our community, right? I think that authority should be trusted. And if it's ever violated, then we deal with that. That's OK.

But we give them a gun, we give them a badge. They have the authority to take people's liberties away. That's a big deal. I trust them to do their job. And I think people appreciate that. A lot of that got changed at the state level, like the police pursuits. I had a middle-of-the-road

policy before. It's fairly restrictive now, but I can't change that. That's very frustrating to some of our people. So I think they like the culture here.

We've talked about the last couple of years have been difficult for law enforcement. I think they appreciate—this is going to sound self-serving, but I don't mean it that way—a leader who will go out and defend the profession still and is not afraid to say it. I've come to this conclusion, I'm going to keep doing what I think is right we changed our motto to do the right thing at the right time for the right reasons.

Is that overly broad? It absolutely is, because that could mean different things at different times, especially to a deputy sheriff. But I mean it and I stand by it. And it's kind of was an unwritten motto of the sheriff's office when I grew up for 25 years in this organization. And when I came into office, [I said], 'let's make that official. That's a great motto—to do the right thing, the right time for the right reasons.' People really like that, and that's my expectation of them.

Q: How important is transparency for you and your office and could you share some examples of how you are practicing transparency? (25:26)

So, that's a good question. Transparency, I think that word is overused, but it's so important because I'm an elected official, right? And the community gave me a shot at this job. We are a public sector. There is nothing we should do that should be a secret. There are things like contract negotiations where you can't publicly disclose, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the daily stuff we do should be available to the public—that might lead into body cams and things like that.

I've tried to be as transparent as I possibly can, and that is super important. There's nothing to hide up here. You get accused of stuff from time to time in elected office. There's a two-and-a-half-year track record now. I've worked really hard at establishing good relationships within county government, and it goes right to getting in the room and talking to people. We don't have to agree on everything, but the things we can agree on, let's focus on that. So part of that is transparency.

I'm getting to your question here. And so when I get—I get questions from Council all the time, Exec's office all the time, and I try to personally answer those requests as much as I can. If I need help from someone at a different bureau, I'll reach out. But I had a council member reach out about the Office of Neighborhoods, and what it might look like in the future. Within minutes I responded to her email with a very long message from me about some of the things that we just talked about—that goes to transparency. I think probably some of the council doesn't like the moves I made, but I'll be open about it. I'll be honest.

I say this often, what I tell you behind this closed door is what I'm going to say outside of this door. It's if it's the same, you never have anything to worry about. You just tell the truth—what I feel is the truth, and you stick to that. That also goes to transparency.

One of the big things I would mention where if I could point to one thing, how are you transparent? How are you different than other sheriffs? Look at when I first came into office with a rough year, OK? I made some decisions that were controversial. I don't personally feel they were controversial when you dove into them. But the community thought they were, and rightfully so. I'm OK with that. So what did I do? I published my decisions in those which are still on the Snohomish County Sheriff's website to this very day. No sheriff has ever done that before. No sheriff has ever done it.

And these were termination cases. They're legit, right? And I published those. I said, 'OK, I'm getting a lot of questions from the community. Here you go. Here's my reasoning.' Then I took it a step further. I held a press conference, OK? I had my people in there about 45 minutes into it going (hand gestures suggesting to cease speaking). I'm like, 'No, I'm going to say in answer their questions,' and I stayed until the media was done.

Q: If there's someone in the community that wants to see the latest crime statistics in Snohomish County, where can they find them? (28:58)

listen, we've been working on it this week, so I got it. It should be on our website, OK? If it's not, we're working on it. What I mean by that is, this was a controversy over the weekend, so—but this started weeks ago where there's a lot of community and political talk that we should be public facing in all that we do. I agree with that.

And so weeks ago, not days ago, weeks ago, I said, let's get our crime analysis in here. I got Courtney, my Director of Communications in here—let's talk about putting all of our data on the public-facing website, how hard could that be? Logistically, there's some things we just got to figure out. And so that's where we're at with it.

And that became a question over the weekend. And we were already working on it. And then the prosecutor, who, again seemingly got left out of all of this discussion after the forum, he had a great answer. For a year and a half we've been working on—we, so let me say that: The sheriff's office, prosecutor's office, the courts, and I would involve corrections because they're involved as well, in a public facing dashboard. That's been one of Adam Cornell's big things. And we've all cooperated with that. I am OK with that. I mean, if that's not transparent, I don't know what is.