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Training for school safety

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By Lauren Gregory

Staff Writer

With Hamilton County schools to reopen Aug. 13, local law enforcement officials are working to hire, train and place as many school resource officers as possible in the days and weeks to come.



Lou Ann Hamblin

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But not all 33 of the county's middle and high schools will be equipped with their own SROs -- at least not immediately, Hamilton County Sheriff Billy Long said.

"We're working on that, but I'll tell you right now we're not going to have enough," Sheriff Long said. "It won't be at the beginning. Maybe (later) in the fall semester."

Though the sheriff's new budget allows him to add 14 new SRO positions to the seven he already maintains, Sheriff Long says he is counting on other agencies in the county -- including the Chattanooga Police Department, Soddy-Daisy Police Department, East Ridge Police Department and Signal Mountain Police Department -- to contribute officers, as well.

School officials are counting on 10 officers from Chattanooga and one each from the smaller municipalities, Assistant Superintendent Rick Smith said.

This would bring the number of resource officers up to 34, according to Lt. Shaun Shepherd, head of the sheriff's SRO program, but varying demand levels will mean some schools could get multiple officers while others do not get any right away.



"You've got to look at everything," said Lt. Shepherd, who is scheduled to meet with school system officials today to discuss potential placements. Workload, geographic isolation of the schools and student population

all will be factors in the final decisions, Lt. Shepherd said, noting that in general it is preferable to have one officer per 1,000 students.

SEEKING OFFICERS

Lt. Shepherd also is focused this week on conducting interviews within his department for the new SRO slots. He plans to select internal candidates by the end of the week before beginning outside advertising. He said he anticipates the entire process will take some time.

"We don't want to be hasty as to who we hire," Lt. Shepherd said. Though the department recently reduced its qualifications for SROs so associate degrees are "preferred" rather than required, he said, officials value experience and personality over formal education and feel they will be able to select more quality candidates based on those values.

While school officials are counting on using 10 officers from Chattanooga, Police Chief Freeman Cooper said he has not yet made a final decision on how many patrol officers his understaffed department can spare for the job.

"(Sheriff Long has) got to get it sorted out, and then he and I have to sit down and figure out what's going to happen," said Chief Cooper, who previously has indicated that he might supply only two officers this year.

TRAINING EFFORTS

The Chattanooga Police Department has contributed to the effort to train school resource officers by hosting a specialized tactical training course designed for them, Assistant Chief Mike Williams said.

The three-day class began Wednesday with a discussion of prior school crises, target practice and hallway simulation shooting, said instructor Lou Ann Hamblin, a Michigan-based law enforcement official and security expert. It also will incorporate real-life scenarios, including incidents on school buses, Ms. Hamblin said.

Ms. Hamblin called the curriculum "a necessary evil," as "even today, someone is plotting the next Columbine."

Chief Williams agreed.

"Every time somebody tries something like this (school attacks), they try to outdo the last one," he said.

Consequently, he said, SROs play a bigger and bigger role in school safety.

"The SROs will be the tip of the spear in an actual event, because they're there on site," he said. "Who knows the school better than the school resource officers?"

Two officers from the Chattanooga Police Department and two officers from the Cleveland Police Department are among the 17 participants in the course. Scheduling conflicts prevented any Hamilton County officers from attending the training, according to Lt. Shepherd, though he said his department is conducting its own 40-hour basic training course for SROs starting Monday.

That training will incorporate other aspects of a resource officer's job, Lt. Shepherd said, including counseling and lesson planning for guest lectures in the classroom.

Ultimately, school officials envision incorporating the SRO program -- which they have deemed very successful -- into a much larger, overarching safety planning effort, Mr. Smith said.

"We've been looking at several things," he said, explaining that the system is cooperating with members of a number of local emergency response agencies to form the Comprehensive Emergency Strategic Planning Task Force.

That group is seeking to update an emergency response and notification plan first drafted in 2000, said Hamilton County Emergency Services Director Don Allen, who serves as coordinator. The plan is expected to be complete by the time school starts, Mr. Allen said.

"We've got some key professionals working on this," he said. "I'm very comfortable that this thing is moving at the pace it should be moving."

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School resource officer duties:

- * Law enforcement
- * Life advising and counseling
- * Classroom presentation/teaching

Source: Hamilton County Sheriff's Department

EXISTING SRO ASSIGNMENTS

Last year, 20 SROs were assigned to cover 25 schools:

- * 7 Hamilton County sheriff's deputies to cover: Brown Middle, Central High, Hunter Middle, Lookout Valley Middle-High, Ooltewah Middle, Red Bank High, Sale Creek Middle-High and Soddy-Daisy Middle schools
- * 10 Chattanooga police officers to cover: Dalewood Middle, Brainerd High, East Lake Academy, Howard Middle, Howard High, Orchard Knob Middle, Washington Alternative, Hixson High, Ooltewah High, Tyner Academy
- * 1 Soddy-Daisy police officer to cover: Soddy-Daisy Middle, Soddy-Daisy High, Sequoyah High
- * 1 East Ridge police officer to cover: East Ridge Middle, East Ridge High
- * 1 Signal Mountain police officer to cover: Signal Mountain Middle, Signal Mountain High