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Much to be done at Lovington PD

JEREMY DUDA
NEWS-SUN

LOVINGTON — Donnie Smith won't have any trouble keeping busy anytime soon.

Just weeks into his new job as chief of police at the Lovington Police Department, Smith has quite a to-do list. The City of Lovington is doing an overhaul of its Police Department, and it is Smith's job to see that a lot of changes get made.

"There were a lot of things waiting on me when I got here," Smith said.

Smith, who retired as chief of police in Hobbs in 2003, was hired in February, ending a search for a new police chief. Former Police Chief Ron Black left the department Nov. 1, his resignation coming not long before of an audit of LPD was conducted.

The findings of the report by Robert Caswell Investigations, an Albuquerque firm, listed numerous



problems within the department, including a lack of policies and procedures, improper behavior by employees, low morale, the undermining of authority and violations in the chain of command.

Much of Smith's initial time in Lovington has been spent working on new department policies. The standard operating procedure, or SOP, manual used by the department is about 20 years old. If officers followed the SOP exactly as it is written, the audit reported, it would lead to litigation against the city.

"Surprisingly, there's not a stack of

complaints against the officers. There's no stack of tort notices. There's no lawsuits," Smith said.

Smith's top policy priorities will be those regarding arrests, use of force, pursuit and use of defensive weaponry. The audit also recommended new policies on domestic violence response, evidence control, employee drug policy and evidence control, as well as other issues.

"Those are the more critical things, the things that can cause us the most grief in the future and the potential to cause the citizens some problems as well if we don't have strong policies in place," Smith said.

The audit was also critical of the training, or lack thereof, that many officers received. Dispatchers were not current in their emergency medical dispatch training, the report said, and the department did not have a standardized field training officer program.

Some officers told investigators that they were given guns without any firearms training. Others said they had not received any field training.

Smith has plans to increase the level of training his officers receive, and started making calls about training possibilities before he was even hired. He is even hoping to reach an agreement with the Lea County Sheriff's Department to bring a crime scene investigation school to Lovington.

"Training is the key to success in



New Lovington Police Chief Donnie Smith and Sgt. Jerry Sosa talk in the police parking lot.

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this business," Smith said. "Everybody's had the basic training and some advanced training, and some have had many years of training, but I think the biggest favor we can do for the officers and the personnel here, as well as the citizens, is to provide these people with as much ... training as we can possibly get."

There are other things that need to be done at LPD, but the policies, procedures and training are the main priorities right now, Smith said. Things like building maintenance, which Smith said is needed, will have to wait.

The thing that ties all of the needed changes together is accreditation. LPD was accepted into the accreditation process, overseen by the Municipal League and the New Mexico Association of Chiefs of Police, in February, shortly before Smith was hired.

Being accredited means that a department must meet a collection of standards and must continually re-examine its policies and procedures. Accreditation also includes physical aspects of a department, including upkeep of facilities, vehicles and equipment.

"What it does is it forces you to

address all of these issues periodically," Smith said.

Smith said that the biggest advantage of being accredited is that it will help the Police Department improve and maintain the services it provides to the public.

There is also an economic advantage to being accredited, since departments that have gone through accreditation save money on their police law enforcement liability insurance.

"It's not a significant percentage, but when you look at how big those premiums are, even a small percentage is a chunk of change," said Lovington city manager Pat Wise.

Since Lovington began looking for a replacement for Black, Wise has said that accreditation would be the top priority for the new police chief. He is pleased with the progress the department has already made in achieving that goal.

"We are well under way with that process and should have it finished ... well within the two years they predicted it would take," Wise said, adding that he is being optimistic. "We're moving at breakneck speed to get that done."



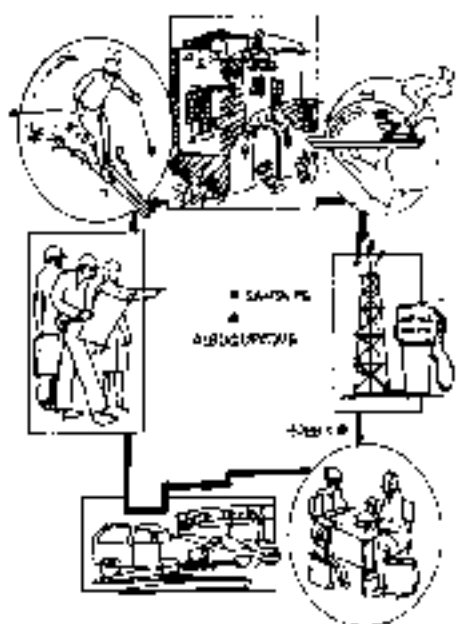
Smith confers with dispatchers at the Lovington Police Department.

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