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Monday, January 12, 2009

## States beat a path to Michigan to find police officers

George Hunter / The Detroit News

*Wanted: Men and women with police experience. Must tolerate cold weather and occasional moose sightings.*

Police recruiters from Anchorage, Alaska, will visit Ann Arbor next week in hopes of luring experienced officers north.

As with departments throughout the United States, Anchorage is having a hard time finding qualified candidates to patrol its streets, so the department hopes to take advantage of Michigan's economic troubles by enticing veteran officers with offers of higher pay, better perks and job security.

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Recruiters from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., were in Metro Detroit last month. Denver, a couple of towns in Wyoming and the Nevada State Police all have come calling.

There is a law officer shortage nationwide. Rosters have thinned as more retire or take buyouts. Some budget-strained police departments aren't filling open positions, leaving a bigger workload on fewer officers.

But in Michigan, demand for workers -- even police officers -- is in decline. Dwindling tax revenues and municipal cutbacks, with the threat of layoffs, have young officers looking for work before the ax falls, said James A. Tignanelli, president of the Police Officers Association of Michigan.

Anchorage's first stop, Ann Arbor, is considering layoffs, Tignanelli said.

"I don't think guys are going to be considering Alaska just because they are really into hunting or Fort Lauderdale because they like beaches. They are going to take those jobs because they think they'd better go. If you are 10, maybe even 30 from the bottom of the seniority list in a place like Ann Arbor, you're looking."

Criminal justice experts say the nationwide police officer shortage is driven by several other factors as well: Low pay and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have tempted able-bodied, public-service-minded young people into joining the military.

Early retirement packages offered to reduce municipal payrolls also are driving the shortage, said University of Detroit-Mercy criminal justice professor Daniel Kennedy. Many departments lured officers in the 1980s and 1990s with strong pension programs, Kennedy said, and those cops are taking retirements now.

"Just as officers are getting to the point where they're masters at their craft, they're leaving," Kennedy said. "Take an officer who became a police officer at 22. Well, now he's 42 and he has a full retirement. What we're seeing is a lot of these officers are taking their retirement and then moving into executive security positions."

Experienced police officers are attractive to agencies with positions to fill, such as homeland security, because they can save money on training costs, Kennedy said.

"They like officers from cities like Detroit, because they have a lot of experience, and because they've already been trained," Kennedy said. "So it's a mixture of economics and experience."

Some police departments are dangling signing bonuses to lure officers. The Houston Police Department last year offered bonuses of up to \$12,000 for new hires, while the San Diego County Sheriffs Office recently offered a \$5,000 signing bonus.

Anchorage's recruiting efforts include launching a Web site and touting the area's relatively healthy economy.

"When we compare our pay and benefits to what it is in the Midwest, even when we do a cost of living comparison, we're very competitive," said Anchorage Police Sgt. Michael Couturier.

Couturier said the average starting salary with overtime for a first-year officer in 2007 was \$73,918. For an officer with 10 years' experience, the average salary was \$103,921 in 2007. The average salary for a patrol officer in Michigan is \$50,960, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The cost of living is higher in Anchorage, however, and someone making \$50,000 in the Detroit area would need to make \$63,082 in Anchorage.

Benefits include 5.4 weeks of annual leave, four weeks of sick leave and squad cars to take home. The police department also pays college tuition and for books so officers can earn college degrees.

Anchorage officials are also quick to point out that Alaska has one of the lowest tax burdens in the nation, with no state, sales or income taxes.

Couturier said he has to clear up a few misconceptions about Alaska when he meets with job candidates. For instance, in Anchorage, there is daylight year round. It fluctuates from 19 hours in June to nearly 6 hours in December.

Detroit News Staff Writer Doug Guthrie contributed to this report. You can reach George Hunter at (313) 222-2134 or [ghunter@detnews.com](mailto:ghunter@detnews.com).

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**When:** Wednesday to Sunday  
**Where:** Marriott Courtyard Hotel, 3205 Boardwalk, Ann Arbor  
**For information:** Call Sgt. Mike Couturier at (907) 786-2444

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