

Guest Column - California Highway Patrol: A shift in what is expected of a recruit and a new reality of CHP policy

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The mission of the California Highway Patrol is to provide the highest level of safety, service and security. In an effort to keep Del Norte's public aware of all law enforcement activity and status, I contacted and conducted this interview with Lt. Commander Larry Depee of the Crescent City area office of the CHP. Crescent City is one of 103 CHP Area Offices in California. Depee was born and raised in Del Norte County. This state law enforcement agency has enjoyed the very highest level of esteem and respect in our community, up and down the Golden State and across the United States.

Currently, 15 officers of which two are administratively assigned within the new Crescent City headquarters patrol all state, county and city roads, along with all state-owned property like the Del Norte County Fair. Assigned are three sergeants and one lieutenant/commander. At present, four patrol officer vacancies exist. Within the office, there are four professional support staff, with two vacancies open.

The CHP has 1,000+ unfilled trooper openings and 500+ non-uniform position vacancies. Alarming, the attrition rate is 27 officers a month resigning or retiring.

When asked if traditional high standards for entry into the 27-week, live-in academy have been lowered because of challenges in recruiting officers, Commander Depee was candid. "Yes, standards for the written test only have been lowered" but emphasized, "the academy retains its prestigious high standard of excellence during the rigorous training program." About one percent of all applicants eventually become CHP officers or trooper. Some years back, the CHP adopted the official title of officer but trooper is still very commonly used. Most of the 50 state police or highway patrol agencies utilize the title trooper for its sworn staff.

Law enforcement recruitment continues to be very sketchy. CHP recruitment is no different. Lt. Depee attributes the recruitment issue to a shift of what is expected of a recruit at the legislative level and the new reality and perception of CHP policy. There're plenty of new tools to make every effort to lower the Mileage Death Rate (MDR).

My curiosity brought out questions about protecting the public. There's still no fail-safe handle on drivers endangering motorists who drive under the influence or drive impaired. Procedures are in place to check alcohol abuse while operating a motor vehicle but, to date, there's no breathalyzer device invented to assess driving under the influence of marijuana or other chemical enhancements which can most certainly impair one's driving ability; that's where CHP officer training kicks in. If a trooper determines a driver may be operating a vehicle under chemical influence, the trooper may arrest the driver and have the suspect medically screened for impaired driving.

Courts have upheld the implied consent law for additional scrutiny. The driver may be pulled over for a broken taillight and the officer may note the noxious odor of marijuana or other identifiable symptoms of DUI and place the driver under arrest. I applaud this proactive law enforcement. There's no question these interventions save lives.

Another area of grave concern is the explosion of self-admitted homeless who live in their automobiles and recreational vehicles full-time, pull over in any wide spot on the road and effectively reside in their vehicles. The newest hot spot for vehicle residency is on a little known dirt road called Vance Street, corner of Walton Street, next to the Quality Inn and The Purple Cat off South 101. Unacceptable! The consequences of this dynamic are dire and dramatically impact communities, especially small rural communities like Del Norte County. The CHP can compel these drivers to "move along," but the question lingers: Where do these vehicles move on to? Commander Depee states that lawmakers have not yet found the answer which addresses this growing problem of folks living in their vehicles on Crescent City and Del Norte County streets and highways. Law enforcement does not have the tools necessary to deal with the health and hygiene conditions these individuals are creating. I hold our legislators in Sacramento responsible for allowing these conditions to endure. Sen. Mike McGuire and Assemblymember Jim Wood sit on their hands while our community suffers.

Yet another troubling issue is speeding on 199. Along the route are several yellow cautionary signs to slow down to the recommended speed posted. Unfortunately, these speed reduction signs are recommendations only. The white signs are enforceable. 55 mph is the speed limit up and down this dangerous road. Changing the yellow signs to enforceable white is a challenging and arduous process which the board of supervisors and our local transportation commission have been reluctant to undertake. Supervisor Chris Howard publicly made that statement at a Local Transportation meeting two years ago. Difficult to change yellow cautionary sign to white enforceable signage? C'mon, get real, Chris. Of course the process is difficult; that's why the public elects county supervisors. Do your job, Supervisor Howard and start changing those signs. Speeding is and remains a big problem along 199.

Depee stepped back from the formal interview process to express his deep appreciation to the public for support of the Crescent City CHP Office. "Public support of our mission makes a huge difference in how we do our job," says Depee. The CHP acknowledges CCPD, DNSD, Yurok Tribal Police and colleague state and federal agencies, which work closely with the California Highway Patrol, through the Law Enforcement of Del Norte County (LEDN) group.

Be safe out there. Slow down and drive with caution up and down 199 and over Last Chance Grade. Better to be 30 minutes late in this life than 20 years early to your final destination.

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