



# **Deputy Sheriff's Association of Bexar County**

## **One Badge. One Voice.**



**To: Bexar County Judge Nelson W. Wolff**  
**Commissioner Precinct 1 Sergio "Chico" Rodriguez**  
**Commissioner Precinct 2 Justin Rodriguez**  
**Commissioner Precinct 3 Kevin Wolff**  
**Commissioner Precinct 4 Tommy Calvert**

**December 14, 2020**

**From: Jeremy Payne, President**  
**Deputy Sheriff's Association of Bexar County**

**Re: Recognizing the Human Cost of Understaffing of Bexar Co. Sheriff's Office Jails**

Dear Judge Wolff & Commissioners:

Albert Einstein is widely credited with saying, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results." It has become a vicious cycle in Bexar County that commissioners set a starting wage for detention officers that are not competitive enough to attract and retain sufficient applicants to fill vacancies. Then commissioners have to budget millions of tax dollars for overtime to meet state-mandated jail staffing standards. The sheriff then employs and trains more detention officers only to have as many quit as are hired. This results in current detention officers who are forced to work 60-80 hours per week under inhumane working conditions.

The union had obtained anecdotal evidence that the physical and mental health of detention officers was deteriorating to a dangerous level and had reached a point that continuing the current practice was unsustainable. That is when we decided to retain a mental health expert to survey BCSO deputies and detention officers in order to provide factual information we could present to the Commissioners and Sheriff. To say we were shocked, depressed, and saddened by the results would be an understatement. The study revealed the truth behind all of the pleas for help we have received from so many deputies. We invite you to join us in acknowledging that we have to recognize the human cost of repeating the cycle again next year.

We truly understand the challenges the sheriff faces in meeting state jail staffing mandates and hiring adequate numbers of men and women for the most difficult and underappreciated job in the nation. We wish the sheriff had not taken a position that the situation "is what it is." The sheriff stated, "working in a jail can only be so enjoyable, but if overtime is necessary deputies will be paid." We concur that working in a jail can only be so enjoyable; however, the sheriff's position seems to be that his only obligation and responsibility to his employees is to meet the mandatory legal requirements and pay them. We believe the sheriff has a moral obligation and responsibility to provide a safe and healthy work environment. The failure to provide adequate rest breaks, making food available, especially on mandatory 16-hour shifts and access to restrooms as needed is solely within his discretion.

The Deputy Sheriff's Association of Bexar Co., or DSABC wants to work with Commissioners' Court and the Sheriff to break this cycle; however, we cannot break the cycle unless the Commissioners and Sheriff recognize the human cost of understaffing the jail. We need a commitment from the Sheriff and the Commissioners Court and an acknowledgment that there are solutions and that we can begin turning the agency around. We have not thrown our hands up and stated any effort to improve the living and working conditions of detention officers is like "putting lipstick on a pig." Below are some short- and long-term union-proposed solutions to begin the discussion:

First, we believe the sheriff and commissioners' primary focus should be to adopt policies and practices that create a safe and healthy work environment. Employees should be treated with respect, provided reasonable breaks, time to use the restroom, and food, especially during forced mandatory overtime. The County should conduct an immediate independent mental health evaluation, ascertain the full impact of understaffing on its employees, and make recommendations to Commissioners and the Sheriff based on the evaluation findings. Detention officers should be granted on-site access to mental health professionals without repercussions, especially for probationary employees.

Second, we believe we need to focus on short-term staffing relief for our detention officers that are workable and affordable. We are willing to negotiate a policy that allows law enforcement deputies to work voluntary overtime in the jail at a cost-neutral rate, which would free up "temporary jailers" to start their academy training and provide temporary relief to detention officers.

Third, we recognize the fiscal challenges compounded by the COVID-19 virus and considered that when we proposed that the parties focus on increasing the starting pay and compressing the steps from 9 to 5 years for detention officers only instead of asking for an across the board wage increase. It is evident that low starting wages for detention officers make it difficult for the sheriff to compete in a competitive labor market. We also recognize that the low pay and oppressive working conditions make it impossible to retain young officers the taxpayers paid to recruit and train.

DSABC is proud to represent the men and women of BCSO, and it pains us to read the pleas for relief. We are committed to fixing these problems, and we hope the commissioners and the sheriff are as well. It will not be easy, but surely, we cannot continue to ignore the human costs of doing the same thing, and acting like the problems are not solvable. We appreciate your attention to the mental health survey and accept our offer to work together.

Fraternally,

Jeremy Payne, President  
Deputy Sheriff's Association of Bexar County