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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** For one job you would see hundreds of applicants, hundreds for one job. Right now we run multiple processes to get one person in the door. That's an incredible change. Just 10 years ago we were still seeing 60 to 80 applicants for a deputy sheriff or a jail job. We would run those processes for an entire day. As soon as someone applies now, we're trying to get them in for interview that week. Because we know that the pool is so small and there's so many jobs out there. I think that's been a big part of it. Supporting these men and women in law enforcement, I'm telling you, these are some of the best people that I've ever met in my entire life. They are good, honorable people. Do we have some that have misstepped? Absolutely. Trust us police leaders to handle it and deal with it because I've fired a couple in my department alone, good people, but they've made mistakes and they don't live up to the high standards. When we empower those local leaders to have those high standards, be transparent in their communities, have the support of federal, state and local. Leaders, I think you'll see the increase in young men and women wanting to serve again.

[00:01:20] **Speaker 2** Questions, comments by committee members? One thing I'd go ahead, Representative Pinot.

[00:01:28] **Speaker 3** Thank you, Chair Schnee, thank you, Sheriff, for being here. We talked, and you referred to what we can do in helping the state to reference the bill here, which I believe Representative Donovan is the lead on, and AB 138. So it's kind of similar to the bill that I mentioned. Yes, sir. I really, so appreciate you speaking to that. That's what we need to hear from the law enforcement community to support these bills and then if they need to be amended and tweaked, we've got to know that, so your input is very valuable. I'm curious if you're willing to address the judicial system. I often see, at least in my opinion, and I think the opinion of many others in the legislature, that law enforcement is doing their job admirably, making arrests. And then those individuals end up on the street and very shortly thereafter, under arrest or after a very short period of incarceration, or even any incarceration. What is your experience in Columbia County in that regard? How can you see repeat offenders going to call them that? And what would be your advice for us to get the judicial system to step up and to do their jobs better and more efficiently?

[00:03:03] **Speaker 1** I think that's a great question. And I know the answer will vary from community to community. Let me speak for most sheriff's offices in rural Columbia County. It is a concern, and we hear that from our officers a lot. I spent over 20 years in our investigative unit. So I saw the firsthand work in these sexual assaults, work in this homicides, and seeing the lack of I think justice, especially for our victims, I think there's no secret. I think it's everywhere across most law enforcements. They work hard, they're transparent, they try to bring justice, they come into it with an honest approach, and we're just truth seekers. I don't care what way an investigation goes. We just want to find the truth and we want to hold people accountable for their actions and make our community safe. We're not always seeing that with what we consider to be some serious crimes when it gets to and through the court systems. But you know, we tell our deputies and our officers, it's not under your control. You need to focus on what you need to do and we are going to enforce the crimes or the laws. If the legislature wants to change a law, change it and then we'll enforce those laws. We have to do that to really separate. I think that sanity Because it's it's heartbreaking when you put your heart and soul Miss a lot of birthdays and family events to do investigations I mean these detectors are working 12 18 hours a day on these serious criminal matters Then to see really nothing happen when it goes through the court system. Yeah, that's that's tough on them But we sure as leaders try to convince them. Listen, you keep doing your job. Do what you can control There's a separate process for that what what the state could do. I don't know I don't know if there's been consideration for any legislation legislation on that, you know, it's hard because every situation Has a different meaning or reasoning to it You know mandatory minimums, you know, there might be a circumstance that that a mentor minimum won't wouldn't be reasonable on So I think every case is fluid and everyone needs to be looked at individually and separately In and we want local government right and when you have local judges and local DA's and That's that's what you're going to get from jurisdiction to jurisdiction because I know some counties that are very strict You know find a lack being one of them Some of the northern counties are very strict in holding criminals accountable, but many are not.

[00:06:01] **Speaker 2** Very good, Sheriff. One last question on my point, anyway. Policing used to be, to a great extent, I think, or at least to some extent, a legacy kind of profession. You know, my dad was a cop or my uncle was a police officer, sheriff. And do you see that disappearing? And second of all, too, I know the military was always a big recruitment source for police departments. Is that continuing or has that slacked off? What's your feeling on those things?

[00:06:49] **Speaker 1** Yeah, to answer both your questions. Yeah, we're still seeing some applications from the military, not as many as we have in the past. I think I've got four or five active duty military on my department. I've gotten about 15 that have served in the military that are not actively serving that are on my department. And I think you're seeing that across most departments. I see the opposite with the with the legacy matter of fact most of the men and women that I have hired or work for me They have a family member in law enforcement But I've also heard a lot of the the more senior deputies saying I don't want my son or daughter to come into this field. I discourage them. I'm trying to talk them out of it as they're, you know, in late high school years trying to decide what their career path should be. And I do the opposite. I've had two of my... Sons enter the law enforcement field so But but not I'm still seeing it. I don't know if others are but Most of them that I'm hiring are from a law enforcement or military family. It's the other ones It's The ones that have not had that law enforcement Or military service it's those Folks that we're trying to recruit to encourage them that this is an honorable profession and to come into the field because there's just not enough of the other ones in that pool right now.

[00:08:25] **Speaker 2** Very good any other questions or comments by committee if not sheriff thank you very much appreciate your time thank you you're welcome next is chief alex ramirez from the city of

[00:08:45] **Speaker 4** Good morning. Good morning committee members. Thank you for having me. My name is Alexander Ramirez. I go by Alex. I come from Syracine. I was in Milwaukee for many years. A little bit about Racine. We have a population of about 78,000 people. We have high employment rate, high poverty rate, and we have a lot of urban-like problems. But other than that, we'd sit along Lakefront, it's a beautiful place. Because the taxpayers are paying me, it's my choice to live in the city, we're seen downtown, right by the lake, because I believe that the people deserve one of their leaders to be available to them at all hours of the day. Sometimes I don't like working all hours of the date, but that's what we do as leaders, and that's why we do this public service, as you guys may know. All right, again, thank you for having me. I'm going to provide a little background here about the Racine Police Department in recruiting, retaining some of the sworn officers, provide a historical context, and summarize steps taken to address these issues. You can stop me at any time, but I'm sure you're probably going to wait until the end. Anyway a little background key events. I came to the received police department back in May 2021. They did a national search for police chiefs. I was one of two finalists. I did not get it. It was a gentleman out of Cincinnati but he had gotten the position and he decided to give me a call and I obliged and said yeah he'd asked me to be the number two guy and I did. Shortly thereafter he left and after a small trial period I became the chief of police there and I'm very proud of that. But little key events that happened up there in May of 2020. 21 sworn members retired, including most of the command staff, largely due to changes in city benefit structure. Since then, 99 new officers have been hired, including several from other law enforcement agencies. I know that the service before me has spoken, and I know I've taken some from Milwaukee County. Thank you. And... That's what it is. The situation is like they train them. They want to come over. We'd be glad to even take them in if they pass certain background. Even though I say 99 new officers have been hired, we're authorized for 196. We were down to 133. So you can imagine the impact that it's had on the city. And when we did the numbers, our crime rate spiked very high in 2022 because of that. I attributed it because of those numbers. There was a loss of confidence in the previous administration and the retirement of the chief led to a national search for a new chief. That's when I came in shortly thereafter. The newly hired chief remained in the position for only two years, and I just spoke about that. The Department has faced significant transitions in leadership, policy, and personnel structure. Officers felt undervalued, unsupported, prompting many of them to retire, resign, or seek other lateral transfers to other agencies. Just like anybody else, we lost officers as well because of the wages and because of other opportunities, because there was no confidence, I felt, in doing my historical research in the Racine Police Department. There was budget cuts, budget cuts and freezes. This has an impact. And you start cutting positions out. It's going to impact public safety. Public safety is my number one priority, and public safety is I think the number one priority for I think for any law enforcement leader. The budget cut and freezes contribute to reductions in staffing and resources impact in operations and hiring capacity. Some of our challenges that we have for recruiting. The contractual and benefit instability. Currently, their contract expired in 2020. We are now in 2025. It wasn't until April 2023 they just had an amendment to the wage structure and some other payouts for sick time, but the 2020 contract is not signed as of yet. So you can imagine that impact that has on individuals who are working their butts 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, working their holidays, missing family time, forced overtime. So these are some of the challenges that we had faced. We're getting better now, but we had faces. The instability led to lateral transfers that I spoke about by veteran officers to departments offering more competitive compensation. We had difficulty in attracting qualified cancer during a period of uncertainty. Back in 2020, we had the impact of COVID-19 that affected everything in the world. During the pandemic, officers were required to work extended shifts with minimal staff. This increased burnout and attrition, particularly among senior staff. Also, that contributed to some of these recruitment challenges was a negative public perception, distrust in law enforcement due to high-profile incidents involving police misconduct. And the Sheriff spoke about that earlier. Social movements like Black Lives Matters have led to increased scrutiny and increased police practices. Many potential candidates are deterred by the reputational risk associated with this profession. We had a diminished applicant pool. Historically, Racine Police Department received around 300 applicants per cycle. Between 2021 and 2025, this number dropped to approximately 100 applicants per year. So you can see right then and there, that stat alone is that people are determined away from this profession. Some of the key contributing factors are the national scrutiny of law enforcement and shifting of police public sentiment. More attractive private sector alternatives and better compensation in neighborhood, neighboring agencies, sorry about that. Continued uncertainty surrounding contract negotiations and long-term benefits. Our hiring standards had to change a little bit. We went from you had to come in with 60 credits, which is required by state law within five years of hire. We removed that and just followed state law is that you can get your 60 credits within the five years higher so that we change that benefit structure. The hiring status, which include the physical fitness test. Some people can't perform physical fitness tests. Even if you were to tell them, hey, you've been hired, you're going into next class, it's four months away, you should start getting ready. I remember when I went in, I was practicing. Standards have changed since then. I'm by 30 for the fifth year, but I had to hang on a bar for 45 seconds. I don't know what that had to do with policing then. Things have obviously changed, but i was able to get through it. There's psychological evaluations that people aren't afraid of. Background checks. Some people have some sketchy backgrounds. And of course, people are afraid to interview. Past drug use, even in states where marijuana is legal, can disqualify candidates. I'm just 20 miles from the board of Illinois, which is recreational marijuana is illegal. One of the application questions is about, have you used marijuana? It's legal in their state. They would have, we would expect them to answer truthfully. So they would say yes. So that's one of the qualifications. We ought to even change that to not using marijuana at the time of application and since then. So I need you subject to drug testing if you pass everything. So one of those things, those are one of our challenges that we have. All right. And then of course the competitive job market. Law enforcement competes with private sector jobs that offer better pay, flexible hours, working from home, remote working and less risk. Careers in technology, healthcare, and logistics are increasingly more attractive. Some of our retention challenges are leadership vacancies. The complete retirement of the command staff in 2021 left a leadership gap. Leadership was later supplemented by two external hires, one which included me, introducing a significant culture shift. The chief was brought in through a national search, departed after two years, further contributed to the instability, and then me, still an outsider. So morale and organizational culture. Officer Morale had been negatively impacted by long-standing administrative instability, uncertainty about career advancement, compensation, and departmental direction, increased workload, and stress due to staffing shortages. We were expecting officers work 12 to 16 hours a day, but no more than 16 due to the shortages We even asked the sheriff's department to help us cover on third shift just because we were short 133 out of this compared to 196. That's a big gap All right, well, increased scrutiny and legal risks. Officers felt, feel that they were under constant surveillance from the public, media, and even their own departments. Fear lawsuits, criminal charges, or loss of certification can cause officers to leave their profession early. Job stress and burnout. Exposure to trauma, long hours, shift work, take a toll on officers' mental and physical health. Lack of institutional support or stigma around mental health worsens the problem. As officers, we're supposed to be robots. We never should have any mental health breakdowns. But that's completely untrue. We are just as human as anybody else. We have a human scientist. We get up every morning like everybody else. We coach, we go to church. We like to go out to eat and do all the things anybody else does. Some additional factors that are affected are the political climate. Rapid changes in policies and public demands for reform can demoralize officers. Recruitment delays, long hiring process, discourage applicants who need immediate employment. As you know, government employment takes a while to get a job. We can go to a local retail store and get the job the same day. Or get the interview, then get the jobs the same. Some of the strategic interventions and reforms that we've done now. Wage and contract reforms in April 20, 2023, the Racine Police Department, just to stay competitive, implemented a wage increase which included retroactive back payouts for used sick time. These changes contribute to improved morale and increased retention. So you can see that some wage increase and some benefit structure changes for the positive does help bring people in. Incentives and recruitment programs, well, we introduced CAS hiring incentives for new officers up to $5,000. That money ran out. That was all under the ARBIT funds. Of course, we revised our education qualifications and brought them to the applicant pool. Obviously, you have to get your 60 credits within five years of hire, though we do have plenty that come in with their degrees already. We began actively recruiting at career fairs and community events. We still do that to this day. We're modernizing our recruitment strategies using social media, outreach to diverse candidates. We have additional incentives by the city, which include 3% salary bonus for city residents, increased tuition reimbursement, and professional development incentives. We have a youth and pipeline development. We partnered with the Racine Infight School District's Public Safety Academy. We have a police cadet program and community service officer program. These efforts aim to develop local talent and build a community-rooted workforce. Some outlook and recommendations here. Well, we've made significant strides in rebuilding its ranks and addressing past sensibility. To maintain progress, we want to benchmark compensation benefits regularly against peer agencies. We're always competing who's got the better, a lot of it has to do with label contracts, but who's go the better pay? Officers. We'll go to where that better pay is. Expand recruitment pipelines through youth engagement and local partnerships, that's what we've done. Invest in internal leadership development to promote long-term stability. Obviously we want to get our folks educated, getting those degrees so they get those upper command positions and become leaders. Continue to build trust and confidence through transparent communication with both staff and the public. I tell you what, Racine has a great community support for the police department. They're big in our, help us in our support. They're the ones that help us say the police are good. Even though in fact the ones with the smaller voices make the loudest noise, but we have a good community support in our police, from our public. I regularly monitor morale, workload, and retention indicators to identify early signs of burnout. We offer mental health support and resilience training. We have a peer support specialist that has her office in our police department. And that line is out the door. We create clear paths of opportunities for specialization or promotion. That concludes my remarks, but I'm more than willing to answer any questions. That I have here? Or that you have?

[00:22:05] **Speaker 2** Well, thanks, Chief. I appreciate your willingness to be here and a lot of good memories of working with you back in Milwaukee. Having said that, you had indicated that your department has gone five years without a contract.

[00:22:22] **Speaker 4** That's correct. It's yeah, they've been some amendments to part of it. One was the rate wage increase, but okay the health and social

[00:22:27] **Speaker 2** So, that's my point there. It hasn't been five years that you haven't received any pay increase or anything like that. That's correct. There has been some help along the way. Although, and I'm going to ask you this, there's been discussion amongst my colleagues and myself, certainly Milwaukee has gone a couple years now without a police contract. Desire on the part of some here in this building to perhaps explore legislation that would require a municipality or county or whatever that if they've gone a year without a contract for their police officers, that it would automatically go to arbitration. Is that something that you think has merit? Is that's something you could support or would help in your particular situation?

[00:23:30] **Speaker 4** Well, the length of a lack of contract for certain benefits certainly affect the way it affects police departments. Whether you put a timeline on it or not, obviously that's up to the legislators to do. But it's certainly, our officers want to see these things done. They want their contracts done and completed on time. Understandably that there are, you know, there are unions that you have to deal with, there's arbitrators, there's other, each side has their own, you got to give and take something. When it comes to negotiations. They have to negotiate these things out. That's how it's been. It's always been that way, especially with unions. But there's certainly the time limits or timelines could affect things. I believe five years is a long time. Two years is long time, when I was in Milwaukee, and we went years without a contract. And of course, it affects morale, it effects what you want to do. Do you really want to go into work? Do you want get the job done? But there's passion in us that we go to work, even under those circumstances. But it's important that these things get done on time. We're dealing with people's livelihoods, people that protect us day in and day out.

[00:24:45] **Speaker 2** Couldn't agree more questions comments by debate. Yeah representative Alan Thank you for being here today

[00:24:52] **Speaker 3** Thank you. Awesome.