

JOB PROGRAM IN SPOTLIGHT; Riverside County: The Use Of Temporary Assignments Amid Budget Cuts Draws Scrutiny, Including Retirees In Public Safety Posts.

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Body

Shortly after he was appointed Riverside County sheriff in September 2007, **Stan Sniff** called on four high-ranking department retirees, including former Sheriff Cois Byrd, to return to work under the county's Temporary Assignment Program.

Job assignments under the TAP program are typically not supposed to last longer than six months. But three of the TAP employees are still in the program 11/2 years later, making \$52 to \$60 per hour, while also receiving public employee retirement benefits. The fourth returned to work for the department full-time.

At a time when departments are slashing budgets, some county employees and officials wonder whether closer scrutiny should be given to certain TAP positions, particularly those filled by retirees.

"The only thing we'd like you to consider before reducing other county employees . . . is to look at TAP employees, especially those that are double dipping," Eric Nevins, a supervising investigator with the Riverside County district attorney's office, said at last Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting.

Nevins said particular attention ought to be paid to retirees working in the public safety arena under TAP.

Nevins declined to elaborate when reached later by phone, saying that he had received flak for speaking out.

In recent interviews, Sniff defended his use of the three retirees. Each has unique skills and knowledge, Sniff said.

"Shame on us," he said, for not using them.

Besides Byrd, the other retirees that Sniff personally reached out to in late 2007 are former Assistant Sheriff Robert Dotts Jr. and former director of administration, Jan Conklin.

Sniff had also pulled former sheriff's captain Richard Coz out of retirement. But Coz has since returned to work full-time as head of the Ben Clark Training Center.

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Byrd, Dotts and Conklin work their own hours. The only constraint, set by California's public employee retirement system, is that they not work more than 960 hours per fiscal year. Otherwise, they lose their retirement benefits.

None of them has exceeded that cap, according to county records.

Records kept in the county human resources department list each retiree's job specifications as "research and auditing" or "training, research and investigations."

Sniff provided an explanation of what they have done:

Byrd, who was sheriff from 1986 to 1994, has advised the department on jail expansion; is developing an orientation program for new recruits that includes sections on the department's history and ethics and integrity; and is sorting through department artifacts and memorabilia for a display that will be set up in the department's administrative building in Riverside.

Since November 2007, he has worked at least 1,038 hours and been paid more than \$61,000.

Dotts, who has extensive knowledge in the corrections field, has been primarily helping guide the department's jail expansion efforts.

Since November 2007, Dotts has worked at least 1,121 hours and made more than \$67,000.

Conklin helped train new captains on budgeting issues, and oversaw an audit of the Ben Clark Training Center's fee structure.

Since November 2007, she has worked at least 744 hours and been paid more than \$44,000.

According to county guidelines, TAP assignments are not to exceed six months unless the human resources director approves an extension.

But county records show that human resources staff members have "reassigned" Byrd, Dotts and Conklin to the same jobs every six months.

Human resources officials acknowledge that was an administrative error.

But Human Resources Director Ron Komers said he still would have approved the extensions.

"We don't second guess" departments, he said, adding that often a department has a special project that is better suited for a retiree from that department.

Byrd said in an interview that he is not getting rich from the temporary work. He added that with 35 years of experience in the Sheriff's Department, he has valuable knowledge that he can impart to new recruits.

The Sheriff's Department has 19 lower-level employees enrolled in the TAP program, mostly working clerical jobs or helping with firearms re-certifications, Sniff said. Most of them are retirees, too, he said.

There are 583 TAP employees countywide and 67 of them are retirees, according to human resources officials.

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At Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting, Chief Executive Officer Bill Luna said department heads have been directed to minimize the use of TAP employees.

Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster said in an interview that he wants to see more stringent oversight of the TAP program.

Departments must be required to show that they have done an exhaustive search from within existing staff before tapping outside help, especially retirees, he said.

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