

SUNDAY ISSUE: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN GEORGIA

THE EDITORIAL BOARD'S OPINION

Focus on public safety is a win-win for police, citizens

Better pay, increased training for law enforcement officers are good steps toward improved relations between police and the public they serve.

Gov. Nathan Deal's administration has chosen to focus on public safety in recent years. It's a politically smart move, for sure. More importantly though, if done well, a consistent focus here is wise policy that can save lives and make Georgians safer.

That backdrop helps in seeing the significance of Deal's latest package of law enforcement reforms announced last month. They include a double-digit pay raise for state law enforcement officers. The governor also unveiled a plan to rev up training requirements for the 57,000 law enforcement officers in Georgia.

This double-barreled proposal is a very good one, we believe. Well-trained, adequately paid law officers are needed now perhaps more than ever. Frequent news reports of clashes between civilians and police, with sometimes fatal results, reinforces the need for society to provide all possible resources to those who pin on badges each day and patrol dangerous streets.

Deal's announcement made an eloquent case for change. "Since our founding, one of government's primary roles is the protection of its people," said Deal. "While the responsibility to provide for the public's safety has not changed over the course of time, the demands of fulfilling this fundamental obligation have changed and grown. We ask our law enforcement personnel of all levels and ranks to do a very difficult job, one that requires great skill, long suffering, and dedication of purpose." We couldn't agree more.

Understandably in this cost-conscious state, much of the attention so far has centered around the roughly \$79 million cost of providing 20 percent pay raises to more than 3,300 state-level law enforcement officers.

In our view, it is money well spent. Cops, state troopers, corrections officers and the like don't sign on for the money. Even so, given the considerable risks they take on every day, increasing their pay is a tangible measure of support from a grateful public.



Courtney Gunter, a probation and parole officer with the Department of Juvenile Justice, shakes hands with Gov. Nathan Deal after he proposed a pay increase for state law enforcement officers. After the announcement, Deal shook hands and thanked every law enforcement officer present. House Speaker David Ralston and Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle also were on hand. BOB ANDRES / BANDRES@AJC.COM

The pay raises have, not surprisingly, engendered some blowback among local and county officers who often work for less pay, with no large raises in sight. They have a good point, and city and county officials across Georgia – along with the Gold Dome – should seriously explore ways of finding money to raise salaries for these officers as well.

Increasing pay should help attract – and retain – quality people who're worthy of the oaths they take and the responsibility they shoulder. People – and societies – on average get what they pay for. The extraordinary heroism and sacrifice of law enforcement officers proves that we often get a lot more. We'd be remiss in not noting, too, that sometimes we get a lot less, as seen in questionable officer actions that ended in fatal, perhaps avoidable, consequences.

All of which points to the importance of Deal's proposed boost of officer training requirements. It makes sense that better-trained cops will make better decisions – espe-

cially where it counts most, in life-or-death decisions.

The plan calls for expanding training on use of force, as well as techniques for de-escalating potentially dangerous police-citizen conflicts. Officer training for dealing with mentally ill persons during crisis episodes will also be enhanced.

A task force made up of civilians and law enforcement will also be created to review current training standards with an eye toward recommending improvements.

The additional training for police can only yield positive results, we believe. Deal and the Legislature should also give ample attention to additional ideas and ways to further strengthen training requirements. Society's centuries and the public they serve both deserve well-trained officers who know what to do – and when – in this violent tinder-box of an age in which we live.

We're pleasantly surprised that this election year hasn't brought forth assertions that

better-equipping police in "soft" skills of persuasion and community relations represents a dangerous retreat from "law and order." Such talk, we believe, overlooks history.

Not long ago, the best law officers knew how to skillfully defuse many powder-keg situations using words, and not weapons. Society was the better for such work, we believe. Britons of the early 19th century summed it up well in what became known as Sir Robert Peel's Principles of Policing. In part, it reads that "Police use physical force to the extent necessary to secure observance of the law or to restore order only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient."

Giving Georgia's protectors more tools to live up to that lofty ideal during this volatile time is well worth the cost and effort.

Andre Jackson, for the Editorial Board.