

Police officers out on leave means minimal coverage on streets of South Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Going to 12-hour shifts was supposed to put more officers on the streets of South Lake Tahoe on weekend nights during times when crime more often occurs.

That hasn't happened despite the change from 10-hour to 12-hour shifts about 100 days ago.

Police Chief Brian Uhler blames it on staffing issues. Three officers are out on medical leave, though he would not say if it's work related or when they may return. Two officers were just hired last month to replace two who had left the department. They are in training. And then there's Officer Johnny Poland's spot that cannot be filled until the FBI figures out what it is going to do.



Johnny Poland gets paid to be a South Lake Tahoe police officer even though

he hasn't worked in more than a year. Photo/LTN file

It's been more than a year since Poland was put on paid administrative because of the federal investigation. But no one to this day is saying what Poland may have done.

FBI spokeswoman Gina Swankie, as in the past, would not speak about the investigation.

Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*, "It is still a joint investigation involving our agency and the FBI. There have been some developments in the recent past. We are trying to bring this situation to some form of closure in the not so distant future."

What the developments are, what closure means and what the time line is are not being made public.

Poland is training with the National Guard and therefore was unavailable for comment. While he is working for the Guard he is not being paid by the city. When he's not training, he's collecting a check, health benefits and retirement benefits from the city. That total cost for taxpayers is not known. The city is not legally able to fill the void created by his forced departure.

12-hour shifts

Lt. Brian Williams will give the City Council an update Dec. 11 about how the 12-hour shift is working. The council had asked to be briefed at about the 90-day mark.

The council was concerned fatigue could be an issue. Uhler says that has not been an issue to date. Data was collected to see if accidents might go up during the last two hours of the shift. There has not been a single accident.

"We looked at overtime savings in terms of payback time with the shift schedule and there has been a \$15,000 savings in the first 90-plus days," Uhler said. "There have been no negatives that are tangible."

When Uhler went before the council in the summer to tell them about how the shifts would be lengthened one of the benefits was supposed to be more manpower at critical times. That has not materialized with officers out. And while they are off duty their positions are vacant.

With the loss of two sergeants and a captain because of budget constraints, there is no room to move someone down into a patrol car even on a temporary basis.

"We have absorbed some losses through attrition, but we've reached the point where we no longer can lose officers and maintain the minimum service levels," Uhler said.