

From the Office of the Sheriff: "Impact of Walker Initiative"

Gov. Walker's budget repair bill has generated significant coffee shop discussion to say the least. Often, I am asked my opinion on the matter and as you know I freely provide it and then some. What is disturbing about the dialogue is how quickly people want to blame public sector employees for our current fiscal challenges and how quick they are to volunteer public sector employee wages and benefits to solve the problem. Often I hear about the gracious benefits I have and how good public employees have it, yet just months ago we advertised for Communication Officers at \$25 per hour, no college required, and received less than three dozen applications. Now, let's be clear, I support the efforts put forth and will gladly pay my share when it comes to pensions and health insurance. My sense is most public sector employees feel the same way.

But do you really understand the breath of change the proposed legislation has on each employee and the impact it will have on their way of life? How will it impact the budget? How much will you, as a taxpayer, save due to the proposed legislation? A careful analysis of the 2011 Dodge County Sheriffs Department budget reveals the following facts. 1) Combined wage and fringe benefits for employees of the department at \$15 million of the department's \$18.5 million budget, 2) Wages alone are roughly \$10.7 million, 3) Department healthcare costs total \$3.2 million, and 4) the total levy (taxes) from the taxpayer is \$8 million.

So, let's incorporate Gov. Walker's proposal for employee contributions towards retirement and healthcare. Wages of \$10.7 million times 5.8 % saves \$593k, healthcare costs of \$2.5 million times 12.6% saves \$315k. In these two areas alone the county will save almost \$1 million as employees will be making contributions vs. the county paying up the entire tab. As a department head, these savings provide some budget relief and should lower the levy, or reduce taxpayer costs for Sheriff's Department operations about \$1 million.

What does it mean for each employee? First and foremost, they are forced to relinquish what took years to obtain. Yes, times have changed and most understand they must partner in the pain in order for the state to become solvent. Very few employees have complained. Most talk about required lifestyle adjustments to offset the loss of take-home pay. The required contributions towards retirement and health insurance will cost the average Sheriffs Department employee about \$5,000 per year or just over \$400 per month in take home pay. This is a significant adjustment for any employee, public sector or private.

So what the bottom line? As easy as it is to criticize the public sector employees please understand the financial impact the budget repair bill will have on each employee and the department as a whole. For young employees raising a family, reducing wages by 18.4% is not insurmountable, but will require significant monetary adjustments within the family unit. The private sector went through just such change the past few years and now the aim is on those who enjoy what was once secure employment with great benefits. What I can assure you is even if those affected don't agree; you will not notice a degradation of services or response. Each and every employee is dedicated and committed to proudly serving the public. What most would like in return is less rhetoric and blame for current state fiscal issues; it's not the employees fault. Thanks for listening tnehls@co.dodge.wi.us.