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Recruiting Challenges Top of Mind for Oklahoma Women in Public Safety

More than 300 of Oklahoma's women public safety professionals gathered for a historic symposium in South Oklahoma City on Wednesday, the largest such gathering in recent memory.

The volunteer-led event, called Oklahoma Women in Public Safety, offered continuing education and an opportunity for women from across the state to compare notes about the unique challenges they face.

Women law enforcement officers dominated the room, but other well-represented professions included firefighters (both paid and volunteer), corrections officers, probation and parole officers, dispatchers, and emergency medical personnel. Among them were a sheriff (Hughes County Sheriff Marcia Maxwell), a police chief (Chief Beth Massey of Watonga), an undersheriff, three prison wardens, a handful of deputy chiefs and assistant chiefs, more than thirty captains and special agents, and a lieutenant colonel in the Oklahoma Army National Guard.

"It was great to see so many women in advanced leadership positions," said Cynda Warlick, a rookie patrol officer with the Harrah Police Department. "I had no idea. It really gives you something to aspire to."

Discussions about overcoming barriers to recruiting more women into many male-dominated-yet-understaffed departments started with better accommodating existing female employees. Shockingly, many police and fire stations and jail facilities around the state still lack separate toilet and locker rooms facilities for employees of both sexes.

Firefighters' personal protective equipment (PPE), known as "turnout gear" or "bunker gear," has also been an ongoing issue. For decades, women firefighters have been forced to wear gear designed for men, with shoulders that are too broad, sleeves and pant legs that are too long, and gloves that are too big. Participants pointed out that ill-fitting gear can hinder their ability to move, putting women firefighters at greater risk for injury.

"No man would be required to do such a physically demanding job in clothes cut for a woman," said Tulsa Firefighter Kendall Taylor. "Departments that allow their female firefighters to order gear designed specifically for women are providing a safer work environment. Obviously, that results in more successful recruitment and retention." Taylor is president and co-founder of Tulsa Metro Women on Fire, a nonprofit that helped put on the symposium.

Oklahoma Secretary of Public Safety Tricia Everest welcomed the women, ages 19 to over 70, who came from some 60 counties and more than 85 different local, state and federal departments and agencies. Four tribal departments and two university police forces were among those represented.

“The diversity of faces, voices and experiences in the room was quite inspiring,” said retired Department of Corrections Chief Millicent Newton-Embry who emceed the event. “It was a wonderful opportunity for women to gain and share knowledge that can increase their ability to reach their goals, individually and collectively. There’s just so much we can learn from each other when we’re able to gather, connect and collaborate in a safe setting like this.”

“There were an amazing number of women from our smaller and more rural departments,” observed Watonga Police Chief Beth Massey. “About 30 of us came alone from our departments, but we’re not leaving alone. We’ve made connections and started building relationships with other women public safety professionals that should be very beneficial.”

Attendees also heard from Oklahoma City Police Captain Michelle Henderson about domestic violence awareness, and from Erin Engelke, CEO of grief counselling center Calm Waters, about maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Notes were taken during the guided discussions so that consensus action items could be shared with policy makers. Post-event survey results will be used to determine if Wednesday’s participants want this gathering of Oklahoma’s public safety professional women to become a formal organization.

Resources providers including the Oklahoma First Responder Wellness Division, Palomar Family Justice Center, the Women’s Resource Center of Norman, and multiple regional library systems had information tables in the lobby. Curated both to help the public safety professional women personally and to help them better serve their communities, the materials ranged from books for children of women in public safety to mental health, grief and domestic abuse awareness.

“Social science research regularly shows that departments with more women are subject to fewer complaints and lawsuits and have better relationships with the communities they serve,” said Oklahoma Secretary of Public Safety Tricia Everest. “We not only need to recruit more women into these professions, we need to ensure our policies support those who have already chosen to make public safety their career. Today was a great step in the right direction.”

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Photograph credit: Jenna Lowrance.