

The Abilene Chamber of Commerce recently asked the 2020 candidates for Taylor County Sheriff a few questions. The questions come from Chamber leadership and are aligned with the core values of the Abilene Chamber of Commerce. The candidates' answers are presented here, complete and unedited, for your information. The intent of the Chamber is to arm our members with as much information as possible, which results in informed decisions at the ballot box.

The Candidates are:

Ricky Bishop

Jeff Stanton

Les Bruce

*All responses received are unedited below.

For more information about the Chamber of Commerce Government Affairs Committee, please email dwilliamson@abilenechamber.com

Ricky Bishop

1. Over the last several years, pay for the Sheriff's employees has improved. Are we where we need to be? If not, what's the right point? No, we are not as we continue to lose employees to higher paying jobs not only in this area, but across the state. When I ran for office in 2012, I made a promise I would work on salaries. At that time, the beginning salary was \$25,303. Currently, I have been able to increase the starting salary for corrections to \$37,000 and \$40,000 for deputies. Clerical staff have also been increased from \$19,500 to \$27,500. Telecommunicators have been increased from \$24,000 to \$35,000. With the way our pay system is structured, I have also been able to give additional salary increases every quarter during the budget year to address mid-level salaries. To be more competitive, we need to increase the beginning salary for corrections to a minimum of \$43,000 and deputies to a minimum of \$45,000.

2. The Taylor County Jail is frequently overcrowded? How do you solve it? If the solution includes additional money, how much and where are you going to get it? We are only overcrowded with female inmates. We have an 826 bed facility and 118 are dedicated to females. I informed the Commissioner's Court in 2014 that we were rapidly approaching overcrowding of females. This is not only a local issue, but a statewide issue. I have been working with the District Attorney and District Judges to get inmates through the court system faster. We currently spend approx. \$100,000/month housing females out of county. The solution is to add a minimum of 212 female beds. We will work closely with the Commissioner's Court through this process of funding for the addition, whether through certificates of obligation or a bond election. We can then contract with other agencies to house their prisoners. Those agencies can ease our local burden of paying for an addition by creating a revenue stream.

3. So many of the cases in the District Attorney's Office or the court system are drug related in one way or another. How can you fight the problem? We are proactive in all of our patrols and every traffic stop is an interdiction style stop looking for wanted people, stolen property, illegal drugs and other contraband. I added personnel in our Narcotics Division. Most importantly, I have expanded partnerships with not only local and surrounding agencies, but Federal agencies. Several Federal agencies (FBI, ATF, and HSI) have chosen to office within the Sheriff's Office so they can work hand in hand with our Narcotics Division every day. We not only file criminal cases in State Court, but Federal Court as well. We joined a Task Force to help combat the drug problem. These partnerships help open the door for additional resources, to include overtime pay, which saves Taylor County Citizens money. In the jail, when volunteers are available, programs like narcotics anonymous are being taught. We also teach drug awareness programs to our community partners.

4. We are hearing more about the role mental health problems is playing in the criminal justice system. How much of a problem is it here, and what is the solution? Mental Health is an issue. Currently approx. 38% of the jail population are

taking some type of mental health medication. Some of this is driven by illegal drug use. In the last few years, we have worked closely with several area partners to find solutions to helping people. The Behavioral Advisory Team was formed after a Mental Health Study was conducted. I am one of the Co-Chairs of this team. Under this team, three committees were formed: jail diversion, crisis response team, and a funding committee. The first two have made great strides in diverting people from jail that do not belong there because of mental illness. The third have found ways to fund mental health projects.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Sheriff's Office, and what is its solution?

The Sheriff's Office has been behind the times. I have been improving equipment and training since I have been elected. I have secured outside funding to build the software for the computers that will be placed in patrol cars for the first time in the history of the Sheriff's Office. Once this is complete, we will be very close to being completely paperless. Deputies will be able to complete most of their work from the field instead of going to the office to complete their work. This should decrease the amount of overtime earned. I have increased our training budget over the years. We currently spend approx. \$83,000 on training. This money is always spent before the end of our fiscal year. I will continue to evaluate and improve the Sheriff's Office so we can better serve the employees and citizens of Taylor County.

Jeff Stanton

1. Over the last several years, pay for the Sheriff's employees has improved. Are we where we need to be? If not, what's the right point?

Over the past several years the starting pay for TCSO employees has improved. The pay for the experienced rank and file has stagnated. The raises that have been provided to experienced employees have actually been similar to what other agencies receive every year for cost of living/inflation adjustments. Currently, TCSO deputies often earn half or less of what other agencies in the area earn for essentially the same job. As a result, recruitment and sustaining quality employees have been a problem.

We are not where we need to be in regards to pay. The right point for pay would be an amount that will allow the TCSO employees to feel like they are respected by their employer and provide motivation to stay with the agency. Obviously, the county's budget will dictate how much the pay can be adjusted, but a more diligent effort to make changes needs to be made.

2. The Taylor County Jail is frequently overcrowded? How do you solve it? If the solution includes additional money, how much and where are you going to get it?

The Taylor County Jail is frequently overcrowded as are most jails in America. As with almost all jails, almost all inmates being housed have been arrested for drug or drug related charges. It as an epidemic that only seems to be getting worse. If we simply expand the size of the jail (a very expensive proposition), I am quite confident we will fill it up as soon as it is completed. I tend to think that working with other agencies to develop and/or expand pre-trial release and drug court programs might aid the ongoing problem. These programs attempt to divert low-level/low risk offenders from pre-trial incarceration.

3. So many of the cases in the District Attorney's Office or the court system are drug related in one way or another. How can you fight the problem?

Almost all cases in the criminal justice system are drug crimes or crimes committed by drug addicted defendants. In the past few years there has been a large uptick in the county's methamphetamine and heroin related crimes. We will never be able to stop the problem, but we can attack it more successfully by partnering with our local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. A unified effort to disrupt and dismantle the criminal organizations who bring drugs to our community must be developed. The best way to do this is by sharing intelligence among all regional agencies with coordination on investigations and an interdiction team. Currently, this is not being done. Federal prosecution of our larger scale traffickers should be the ultimate goal.

4. We are hearing more about the role mental health problems is playing in the criminal justice system. How much of a problem is it here, and what is the solution?

There are definitely many

inmates in the jail with mental health issues. Additionally, deputies regularly contact individuals with mental health issues while working patrol. The solution for this matter is for the TCSO to partner with mental health professionals to obtain additional training on how to deal with mentally unhealthy individuals. Additional training is needed for all deputies, all jailers and medical staff.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Sheriff's Office, and what is its solution?

One of the more significant issues facing the TCSO is the lack of training. Deputies must receive up to date and regular training in myriad of areas (legal updates, emergency medical, liability, driving, firearms, tactics etc.). The job of a deputy is complex. One day a deputy might be capturing a loose cow and the next responding to an armed barricaded subject. Laws governing law enforcement change daily in regards to subjects such as narcotics legality, evidence processing, and search and seizure. Training must become a priority for the TCSO. Failure to do so will eventually lead to a tragedy of some kind or lawsuit due to a poorly made/untrained decision by a TCSO deputy.

Les Bruce

1. Over the last several years, pay for the Sheriff's employees has improved. Are we where we need to be? If not, what's the right point? From of 2009 – 2013 the Sheriff's Office received approximately 18% in salary increases. Over the past 3 years the Sheriff's Office has received approximately 12% salary increases. These salary increases are due strictly to cost of living (COLA) raises for County employees. The net result has been a 4% per year increase since 2009. These COLA are determined by the Commissioner's Court annually. Any additional raises have only affected starting salaries. This is where the major problem exists. I believe Taylor County Law Enforcement must have its own pay scale that measures the value of each position. Going forward as a county we must place a greater value on mid-level tenured personnel including correctional officers, all sworn personnel, civilian personnel and 911 communication operators.

2. The Taylor County Jail is frequently overcrowded. How do you solve it? If the solution includes additional money, how much and where are you going to get it? Taylor County deserves a Sheriff that has an understanding and experience to deal with a crisis such as the one the jail is now facing. The ever-growing number of methamphetamine related arrests is the key to the problem. All area law enforcement entities in our area are fighting the "meth war" with great force outside the jail. We must also combat the jail overcrowding issues from inside the jail. This begins with an extensive and effective jail ministry. No person is rehabilitated without God in their life. These programs work hand in hand with other volunteer outreach programs to effectively council defendants and fight recidivism.

3. So many of the cases in the District Attorney's Office or the court system are drug related in one way or another. How can you fight the problem?

Taylor County has a great pre-trial diversion program. It is successful for what it may legally provide. However, I believe it is time for Taylor County to consider implementing a full-time drug court. This full-time court would deal only with drug related cases. This would result in swift adjudication of drug case defendants and relieve a large portion of the over crowdedness we experience at the Taylor County Jail. I believe this could be a very viable solution to our overcrowding problem at the jail. This concept should be evaluated very closely with costs compared between a new drug court and the millions of dollars we might have to spend to add beds to the current jail.

4. We are hearing more about the role mental health problems is playing in the criminal justice system. How much of a problem is it here, and what is the solution? Mental health issues are certainly devastating to many aspects of our lives locally. The county jail is also affected in a very big way. This is why the "Navigator Program" that was implemented and monitored through Betty Hardwick Center is so valuable. However, more needs to be done. The Taylor County Sheriff needs to have networking avenues and professional relationships with all mental health related non-profit programs in our area. Relationships between the Taylor County Sheriff's Office and other related

educational programs may also be of service to members of our incarcerated community or any members of their family.

5. Excluding the issues in questions 1-4, what is another large challenge facing the Taylor County Sheriff's Office, and what is its solution?

It is very important that employees of the Taylor County Sheriff's Office and the Taylor County Jail regain their professional excitement. The only way this can be accomplished is to have experienced law enforcement leadership who can and will lead the way. This leadership must have the experience to build and implement a solid law enforcement operational plan. This plan should be shared with all Sheriff's Office personnel, County government and department heads. Effective new ideas should be encouraged, received and implemented along the way. This plan should include local and statewide recruitment efforts to attract the best qualified men and women to join our Department. Obviously, the future success of this recruitment effort might be hampered by the pay issue that has hovered over the Taylor County Sheriff's Office since I can remember. It is time to SOLVE this issue once and for all.

Abilene Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 2281, Abilene, TX 79604
325-677-7241
abilenechamber.com