

## **Desert Hot Springs residents speak with police department in town hall**

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Around 50 Desert Hot Springs community members shared concerns about traffic safety, homelessness, mental health and diversity training on the force with the Desert Hot Springs Police Department in a town hall meeting on Saturday.

The town hall was organized by DiversityDHS, an LGBTQ organization for Desert Hot Springs residents, which invited LGBTQ community members to attend and have a conversation with Police Chief Jim Henson and Deputy Police Chief Steven Shaw at city hall.

One audience member, who left before the event ended, asked questions about diversity training in the police department and how officers are taught to help members of the LGBTQ community. The questioner also asked how the current training addresses treatment of transgender people, for example, in instances where they may have been sexually assaulted.

Shaw said there is diversity training that is required to be done every two years, similar to other types of training. He said officers learn how to talk to different communities and will find them resources, but did not provide specifics.

The department expects people to come to them if they are a victim of what could be a hate crime, he said.

'We need to know about that so we can document that and investigate that and keep track of what's going on in our community,' Shaw said.

The questioner later asked for a commitment that the department would hire LGBTQ people to represent them or have an LGBTQ liaison.

'I've tried to hire whoever is qualified. Right now we're up and down the state and across the nation — we are trying to find qualified applicants,' Henson said. 'I encourage the LGBTQ community to send me qualified people and we will hire them.'

Henson said the applicant pool for new police officers is almost non-existent. He said the department is authorized to have 33 officers, but they have six openings.

'Palm Springs, Cathedral City, CHP, just throughout the United States, (hiring) is a problem,' he said. 'The applicant pool — we're not going to lower our standards either.'

A person at the meeting also made a general observation that police should talk about 'diversity' instead of referring to LGBTQ people as participating in a 'lifestyle.'

This is the kind of feedback the department needs, Henson said.

Mayor Pro Tem Gary Gardner, Councilmember Jan Pye, Councilmember Roger Nuñez and City Manager Luke Rainey also attended the event.

Rainey touted how important diversity is to the future of the city, saying Desert Hot Springs' population grew by around 25% based on 2020 U.S. Census Data, and diversity is a driving factor in allowing cities to grow over time.

'When developers come and think about whether they're going to invest millions of dollars sometimes into our city, they look around at the quality of life,' Rainey said. 'Something like (DiversityDHS), as well as any groups in our city that are doing annual events that improve the quality of life, help leverage our city's position for economic development.'

James Nindel, a member of DiversityDHS, said the LGBTQ community in Desert Hot Springs is older, which makes their concerns different than younger people. Nindel is also a planning commissioner.

'We think about crime, getting along with our neighbors and not being hurt in anyway,' Nindel said.

Sam Messler, president of DiversityDHS, said the group's goal is to educate, communicate and build a relationship with the community. DiversityDHS was founded in 2016 and has organized the Pride Festivals in the city since 2017.

'Because of the pandemic we kind of stopped, last town hall that we had was October of 2019,' Messler said. 'We would've liked more, but here we had an opportunity to reinstate that and we'll have more in the future.'

### **Police address homelessness crisis**

Both Henson and Shaw addressed questions regarding homelessness. Shaw said the department has a homeless liaison team, which is considered collateral duty.

'So it's officers that work a normal patrol assignment and then as a collateral duty they do homeless outreach,' Shaw said. 'They go out every week and do homeless outreach — contact the homeless community, try and hook folks up with resources to get them mental health care ... residence, (jobs), that type of stuff.'

Henson said the homeless situation in Desert Hot Springs is hardly as intense as in Los Angeles — which had an estimated 66,436 people experiencing homelessness in 2020 — but is growing worse.

Riverside County's 2020 point-in-time count found there were nearly 3,000 people in the county experiencing homelessness. There were 627 unsheltered people counted in District 4, which is the Coachella Valley. Of that number, 68 people were counted in Desert Hot Springs. There had been 45 people counted in 2019.

The county did not conduct an unsheltered homeless point-in-time count in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and recently conducted its 2022 count in February. A report of the count's results is expected to be released in April.

'I've seen a lot more (people experiencing homelessness) recently, especially on Palm Drive, and we're trying to deal with that. In the past, they were kind of hidden away,' Henson said. 'They would go off, but now you're seeing them and that's caused some of the fatal traffic collisions we're seeing.'

There have been eight traffic collisions from 2021 to March 10, 2022 caused by people experiencing homelessness walking into the road without a crosswalk, according to Deputy City Manager Doria Wilms.

Henson said homeless and mental health issues need to be addressed with serious conversations at the state level. Just throwing money at it isn't going to help, he said.

'We have a mental health problem, not just in our community. Up and down the state,' Henson said. 'Until they address that, it becomes a community problem and it falls on the police department because there's nobody else to call.'

Earlier this month, Gov. Gavin Newsom proposed the Community Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment Court — a plan that would require counties in California to set up a mental health branch in civil court to force people experiencing things like homelessness, mental health disorders and addiction to receive treatment if its approved.

A homeless shelter also recently opened nearby in North Palm Springs. Roy's Desert Resource Center had closed in 2017 but reopened in 2020. There were approximately 70 people living at the center as of May 2021, according to previous Desert Sun reporting.

### **Concerns about speeding, pedestrian fatalities**

Residents also raised concerns about speeding on Palm Drive. Henson said the department is going to get an unmarked vehicle to help officers police speed limits.

'I know there's a problem. This kind of hit with COVID, too. Everything just kind of went crazy,' Henson said. 'CHP started catching people over 100 miles an hour on a daily basis and it's because there wasn't traffic out there. We're a growing city, so yeah, one of the growing pains is traffic, unfortunately.'

He said some of the fatalities caused by cars hitting pedestrians haven't been the drivers' fault. Desert Hot Springs reported 13 fatalities in 2021, of which five were pedestrians. The city had the most pedestrian deaths in the Coachella Valley, along with Palm Springs.

There have been 21 traffic collisions that involved pedestrians from 2021 to March 10, 2022, Wilms said. The most incidents on one street occurred on Palm Drive, between Two Bunch Palms and 6th Street, with 10 collisions total.

The department has tried more enforcement related to jaywalking, Henson said.

'When you have an individual that just walks in front of a car driving the speed limit, your reaction time is not going to be there. We're trying to address it in different ways,' Henson said. 'We've had a couple (accidents) recently, we went out and did more enforcement on jaywalking and that sort of thing. Unfortunately, it's not going to stop it, but at least it will slow it down.'

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**During a townhall meeting at Desert Hot Springs City Hall, residents asked police officials a variety of questions. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun**



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