The Office of the Sheriff welcomes scrutiny of annual overtime in the department. But that assessment should entail rigor and multiple dimensions of analysis – not simply provide a cursory look at gross spending over time.

A brief Overtime Monitoring Report, written by the Riverside County auditor-controller and discussed at the Board of Supervisors meeting March 8, prompted some pointed assumptions about overtime controls in the Sheriff’s Department. A deeper review builds a strong case against that conjecture.

In fact, contrary to such “reports,” overtime at the Sheriff’s Department is by any standard well within existing professional parameters. It is tightly managed and the real professional benchmarks underscore that reality.

For instance, according to a recent study by California Watch, law enforcement agencies in California typically spend 6 percent to 12 percent of their total personnel budgets on overtime. Near the lower end of the range is one of the best-run police departments in the Inland area, at 6.7 percent last year. Well below the range is the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department – at 2.7 percent last year.

This achievement is both a reflection of strong departmental controls and a sign that gross overtime spending numbers, absent context, provide little useful “analysis.”

Gross numbers fail to convey that nearly 60 percent of sheriff’s overtime spending last year was actually reimbursed – via grants, court security, special events and the cities that contract with the Sheriff’s Department for law enforcement patrols. Some $19.8 million in overtime costs were anticipated and built into the budgets approved by each jurisdiction. So the overtime brought no “overruns” or unanticipated charges.

Why not? Because the Sheriff’s Department uses tracking and planning tools, along with disciplined management, to measure, monitor, forecast and when possible minimize overtime.
Consider: In the sheriff’s patrol operations, the overtime hours incurred fell by more than 12,000 in fiscal year 2015 compared with 2014. In the sheriff’s corrections division, where the state Penal Code and Code of Regulations help direct staffing levels, overtime hours dropped by more than 72,000 in that same period.

Strong controls helped drive those declines. All overtime, other than for court subpoenas, must be approved by a sergeant or lieutenant. All overtime usage is tracked and evaluated daily. Overtime reports, including two-year analyses and usage comparisons, are reviewed each pay period and/or monthly by senior managers. And violations of overtime policy, if any, are subject to discipline.

Of course, some overtime is inevitable, and even necessary, in a complex, around-the-clock public safety operation. Causes of overtime include minimum staffing requirements for officer and public safety, unforeseen critical incidents, complex investigations, training requirements that take deputies out of their primary assignment, intermittent county-directed hiring curbs, and employee sick time and leaves of absence.

Labor contracts, negotiated between the county and unions without the sheriff’s involvement, also drive up overtime costs – most directly through sizable annual pay raises, but also through contract provisions that set the length of workdays and create rules for when overtime pay might be required even directly after time off.

The labor deals also mandate an overtime minimum of four hours of pay, at time and a half, when a deputy is off-duty and called back to work to appear in court on a matter arising from the deputy’s employment with the county, even if the court appearance lasts just 10 minutes.

Good overtime analysis explores the myriad causes of overtime and report far more than a single metric of cost. Typically, they also help frame solutions by assessing which costs are unavoidable and which might be better managed – either by the department or by other county officials whose decisions affect overtime spending.

The Office of the Sheriff, which embraces continuous improvement and innovation, is always happy to discuss ways to further reduce overtime. At the same time, it is the department’s duty to prevent a different, countervailing kind of
cost: that of underutilizing overtime, and risking a failure in public protection because of it.

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