

5-year map calls for training, review and transparency

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A new strategic plan recommends the department invest in training, increase its community presence and modernize certain practices.

During the next five years, Chelsea's police department plans to develop an officer recruiting team, modernize its evidence logging system and increase its presence on social media and throughout the western Washtenaw County area.

Those are just some of the steps included in a new 18-page strategic plan for the department OK'd by city leaders April 1, after more than a year and a half of development from a planning group made up of city officials, officers and Chelsea residents.

The road map for police department advancements runs through 2029 and represents the latest in several years of inquiries, audits and improvement plans commissioned after the department's controversial handling of summer 2020 racial justice protests thrust it into the spotlight.

"This has been a long process. It's been a lot of work, and I am proud of what we've been able to accomplish together," said Chelsea Mayor Jane Pacheco, a member of the group that produced the plan.

The document calls for the department to initiate nearly two-dozen actions, some already complete or underway, in the coming years to improve officer training, department operations and community relations. It was developed with the input and facilitation of the Southeast Michigan Criminal Justice Policy Research Project, or SMART, at Eastern Michigan University, according to Chelsea Police Chief Kevin Kazyak.

"The plan focuses on employee engagement and success, enhancing operational efficiency and effectiveness and building community partnership and public trust," Kazyak said.

Many of its recommendations focus on upping employee satisfaction and offering greater professional development and training to city officers. That includes conducting employee surveys, building out internal communication and expanding an employee recognition program, according to the plan.

Chelsea police also plan to boost efforts to attract new officers, through more online recruiting and collaboration with regional universities to implement an internship program, as well as a cadet program for high school-aged students, the plan says.

Under the plan, the department will also continue to review and address procedures identified as deficient by a 2021 outside audit of “high-risk” policies, such as those governing use of force, police pursuits and First Amendment assemblies.

The results of that audit, commissioned after the summer 2020 protests, led city leaders to create a short-term policing task force in 2021, which then in turn recommended the strategic planning group be created in 2022 to produce the plan.

The five-year road map notably excludes one of the task force’s recommendations: the creation of a citizen oversight board for the Chelsea Police Department.

In an interview, Pacheco said the strategic planning group discussed oversight bodies in detail, with expertise from the SMART team, and decided to recommend an “implementation group” composed of a city council member, the police chief and one at-large appointed community member to keep track of the strategic plan initiatives and report back to city council.

City leaders voted unanimously to create the implementation group April 1 and plan to make appointments in the coming months.

Pacheco said while she couldn’t speak for the entire strategic planning group, she felt that path forward was preferable over a citizens oversight body given the size of Chelsea’s department and the city as a whole.

The strategic plan includes other operational improvements, such as upgrading to computer-generated tickets — a step that’s already been completed — and researching new crime statistic measures to “maximize officer patrols,” according to the plan.

It calls for the department to publish general departmental orders on the city website, hold regular listening sessions with the community, expand its social media presence and develop a “Citizen Emergency Response Team” to assist police officers and firefighters in emergencies and large city events.

The department should also invest in officer training, and has already completed workshops dealing with implicit bias, cultural awareness, responding to emotionally disturbed people, de-escalation, officer wellness and first aid, while planning training in other areas, according to the plan.

Police hope to send staff to instructor-level training courses to build-out an in-house training cadre, while also collaborating with other policing agencies and looking for grant

funding available for training on “vulnerable population engagement,” the plan says.

“(The plan) does exactly what we’re looking for, and we’re looking to improve the quality of the officers’ positions here, not only through what we can provide to them for equipment but also the training that we can provide, and that will ultimately provide for better service for the community at large,” Kazyak said.

City leaders and officials roundly hailed the document ahead of the unanimous vote to approve it. Councilmembers Kate Mehuron and Beth Morris were absent from the meeting.

The plan fits well within the philosophy of community policing, said Chelsea City Manager Marty Colburn. “We have a police chief who is willing to carry the water on this, and he will be working with me and with you cohesively through this entire process.”

“This represents a great step forward for our community and for our police department,” said City Council Member Bill Ruddock. “Everything that’s in here only does one thing, improve our service to the community.”