

Park Police Duties Exceed Staffing

Anti-Terror Demands Have Led Chief to Curtail Patrols Away From Mall

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Tuesday, December 2, 2003; Page B01

The U.S. Park Police department has been forced to divert patrol officers to stand guard around major monuments, causing Chief Teresa C. Chambers to express worry about declining safety in parks and on parkways.

Chambers said traffic accidents have increased on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, which now often has two officers on patrol instead of the recommended four. In neighborhood areas, she said residents are complaining that homeless people and drug dealers are again taking over smaller parks.

"It's fair to say where it's green, it belongs to us in Washington, D.C.," Chambers said of her department. "Well, there's not enough of us to go around to protect those green spaces anymore."

Today, the force will begin training unarmed guards who will stand watch outside the monuments. It will be the first time in recent memory that guards have performed such duties. The Department of Homeland Security ordered additional protection around the monuments.

In the long run, Chambers said, her 620-member department needs a major expansion, perhaps to about 1,400 officers.

Congressional leaders, however, have urged the Park Police force to refocus on the Mall, cutting back on such activities as drug investigations and traffic enforcement that take them away from National Park Service lands.

The Park Police department, an arm of the Park Service, claims to be the oldest uniformed federal police agency, tracing its roots to a group of watchmen hired in 1791 to guard public buildings and lands in the capital. The force includes about 400 officers in the Washington area, with the rest split between parks in New York and San Francisco.

In this area, park officers are charged with protecting the Mall, where they were engaged the standoff with tractor-driving tobacco farmer Dwight W. Watson in March. But the force also patrols Rock Creek Park, several major parkways and an assortment of other federal land from Capitol Hill's Lincoln Park to the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Park Police said that this spring, after a survey by the U.S. Secret Service and endorsed by the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior adopted rules requiring four officers to be posted at all times outside the Washington Monument and the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials. Previously, the Washington Monument had one or two officers stationed, and the two memorials had one each.

These new requirements, plus a new post at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial, meant nine additional officers would be on the Mall on most shifts. Before the change, the entire force had just 24 officers on patrol most of the time.

A Homeland Security spokesman said yesterday that he was aware of the Secret Service survey but had no further information about its findings. An Interior spokesman deferred all questions to the Park Police.

Chambers said that, because the new requirements have severely stretched her force, many officers have remained on 12-hour shifts, with only limited bathroom breaks for those guarding the monuments. One recent day, Park Police used high-ranking officers, such as majors and captains, to fill in on guard duties.

In many cases, police said, more officers on the Mall mean fewer officers elsewhere. Even the area that includes Anacostia Park and Suitland Parkway, one of the most violent that the Park Police force patrols, now has two cruisers at most times, instead of the previous four.

Police point to several statistics to show the impact of the cutbacks. On the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, where patrols have been halved, 706 traffic accidents occurred from January to October, which was more than the annual total in the previous four years.

Since April, the number of arrests made by Park Police in the Washington area has declined about 11 percent compared with the same period last year, police said.

Chambers and the head of the Park Police union, Jeff Capps, said that morale is low and that many officers may leave the force if conditions do not improve.

"They took the job to be a police officer," Capps said. "If they wanted to be a security guard, they'd go to the Capitol Police, Supreme Court Police."

The Park Police's new force of 20 unarmed security guards will begin serving around the monuments in the next few weeks, Chambers said. She said she eventually hopes to have a combination of two guards and two officers at the monuments.

Though such guards have worked inside the Washington Monument and the White House Visitor Center, Chambers said they had not previously been used outside monuments in place of a police officer.

She said a more pressing need is an infusion of federal money to hire recruits and pay for officers' overtime. She said she has to cover a \$12 million shortfall for this year and has asked for \$8 million more for next year. She also would like \$7 million to replace the force's aging helicopter.

But leaders in Congress are not inclined to go along. Instead, they have backed a 2001 report by the National Academy of Public Administration, which found that Park Police spent about 15 percent of their time on activities that "often are extraneous to the park service mission."

The study urged Park Police officers to give away some of these duties, such as drug investigations and parkway patrols, to D.C. police or other local and state authorities.

"I don't think there is any question in our minds of fraud, waste or anything like that," said Arnold Donahue, who helped lead the study. "They were a small police force that over the years had grown up into a major metropolitan entity."

Chambers said she is not inclined to give away any duties, believing that other police departments would not put the same focus on problems in the parks.

In the latest budget cycle, congressional leaders said they were "increasingly concerned" about the Park Police refusal to change. They ordered a new study, by the same group, to examine why the previous suggestions were not heeded.

In recent weeks, the Park Police administration and the force's union have said they fear that the stationary posts on the Mall have hurt anti-terrorism efforts, because fewer officers are able to patrol in the area. Chambers said that she does not disagree with having four officers outside the monuments but that she would also want to have officers in plainclothes or able to patrol rather than simply standing guard in uniform.

"My greatest fear is that harm or death will come to a visitor or employee at one of our parks, or that we're going to miss a key thing at one of our icons," Chambers said.