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Fewer cops on North Side?

REALLOCATION OPTIONS | Could be shifted to South, West Sides

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Police districts on Chicago's North Side would lose beat officers to South Side and West Side districts if the city were to reallocate cops based on the volume of 911 calls and backups for police service, a Chicago Sun-Times analysis has found.

Police Supt. Jody Weis is expected to unveil a reallocation plan before the end of the year. One of the factors in his politically sensitive decision will be whether there's an abundance of officers in districts based on calls for service, he has said. Weis hasn't identified the districts that will lose beat officers, how many cops will be shifted or any other factors he will use in the reallocation.

To measure calls for service and backups, the Sun-Times obtained a district-by-district comparison of 911 calls and of "radio assignments pending call events," which means the times there's no car available to respond to a call in a district.

The districts with the lowest numbers of 911 calls and "RAP" events were on the North Side and Northwest Side, including the Foster, Town Hall, Albany Park, Jefferson Park, Monroe and Wood districts.

The Chicago Lawn District on the Southwest Side -- one of the city's largest districts -- was the busiest in the city in terms of 911 calls. Other districts with large numbers of 911 calls and RAP events were South Chicago, Englewood, Harrison and Grand-Central.

The Town Hall District, for instance, had 17 RAP events in the first eight months of 2009 and 2010 and about 64,000 911 calls from January 2009 through Oct. 24 of this year. The Chicago Lawn District had about 130,000 911 calls and 885 RAP events over the same periods.

The city provided the 911 figures to the Sun-Times last week following a Freedom of Information request, but it denied a request for the RAP data -- which the Sun-Times obtained from a source.

Police officials are preparing to reallocate officers even as crime is declining in the city.

Murder was down more than 2 percent over the first 10 months of the year compared with the same period of 2009, and every other major category of crime also dropped except for motor vehicle theft, department figures show.

Still, a hiring slowdown has left the police department more than 2,300 officers a day short of authorized strength, prompting the city to offer its first police exam in four years and consider ways to make the department more efficient -- including the reallocation of officers and asking 911 call takers to send some kinds of calls, such as lost property and telephone harassment, to the city's non-emergency 311 center to relieve the pressure on beat cops.

The department hasn't redrawn the boundaries of beats -- the small areas in each district which a single car patrols -- since the late 1970s. Political pressure from aldermen worried about losing services has prevented the department from tackling beat realignment ever since.

Weis said his reallocation plan will help balance the workload of officers without redrawing beats.

That still irks some aldermen, including Ald. Tom Allen (38th) who has said his ward, which includes the Jefferson Park and Albany Park districts on the Northwest Side, already is drained of police resources because officers have been pulled out to serve on citywide anti-violence units.

Naturally, though, aldermen whose districts stand to gain officers are supporting such a move. Ald. Freddrenna Lyle (6th), whose ward includes the Gresham and Englewood districts, said: "Our officers can't do any preventative police work because all they're doing is running from call to call."

Lyle said she thinks Weis is "honoring his word" to her and other aldermen in high-crime areas by shifting beat officers. Weis, whose \$310,000 annual contract is up in March, also "may feel he doesn't have to weather the storm of a political battle because he knows he's coming to the end of his tenure," she said.

Anthony Beale (9th), chairman of the City Council's Police and Fire Committee, said: "For the first time in over 30 years, we're finally doing the reallocation to put the resources where they're needed."

The city's 911 data show certain areas of the city are "extremely quiet," Beale said. "We don't want to disturb that. However, if we can pull some of those resources to make some communities just as safe and secure as those other communities, we have a responsibility to do that. If you have officers sitting idle all day not responding to any calls and you have other sections where they can't even keep up with the calls, that's a disservice to the residents of this city."

Beale added that the reallocation should be done annually instead of being a "one-time deal."