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Wednesday, January 12, 2000

Town split over chief

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ATKINSON -- Police Chief Philip V. Consentino is a surrogate son to many seniors in town.

He orders officers to deliver prescriptions to their door and to take them to out-of-town doctor's appointments in squad cars.

That's one reason why many seniors and others say the 22-year, part-time police chief is the town's best bargain.

For \$18,000 a year, Chief Consentino offers up his telephone number and his front door for residents to air their concerns. He works up to 40 hours a week, but is paid for just 24 1/2.

"We say nothing ever happens in Atkinson and the reason why that is is because of the police chief we have," said Harold P. Mierop, 63.

But Mr. Mierop's opinion of Chief Consentino, 59, whose wife Joanne and son David also work in the department, is not shared by everyone in town.

The state Public Employee Labor Relations Board recently ordered Chief Consentino to stop intimidating officers who were involved in forming a union. Last week, officers in his department voted 6-5 to form a union and five former full- and part-time officers told The Eagle-Tribune the chief can be "vindictive" and controlling, leading to poor morale and a high turnover rate at the department. A total of 13 full- and part-time officers have left in the last two years, said Jane E. Cole, a Budget Committee member.



Atkinson Police Chief Philip V. Consentino talks with 99-year-old Ruth McPherson during a visit to her home in town. Acclaimed for his senior citizen initiatives, Chief Consentino also has been criticized for his leadership style.

Two days after officers voted to form the union, Selectmen Chairman Joseph DeRosa said it's time Atkinson consider hiring a full-time chief. Chief Consentino isn't certified as a full-time chief by the state.

"I think (Chief Consentino's) given 32 years to the town and he's the longest, dedicated employee of the town," Mr. DeRosa said. "However, we're moving into the 21st century and new officers have new ideas and we need to progress forward with them."

"I think the chief and the officers have to sit down and have an understanding," he said. "It's not 30 or 40 years ago and things shouldn't run like they did."

Mr. DeRosa said the town is "ready for a full-time chief," while pointing out the Police Chiefs Association several years ago predicted the town would need a full-time chief by 1997 or 1998.

John E. "Rick" Daniels, the town's first full-time officer, left in 1998 after working 12 years with Chief Consentino. He said poor morale and watching Chief Consentino single out officers were among his reasons for leaving.

Mr. Daniels, now an investigator with a cable company, was one of four full-time officers to file a grievance in 1998 with the town regarding holiday work policies. The three other officers involved also have left the department.

Mr. Daniels said Chief Consentino sent memo after memo to some officers about everything from how much time officers should spend in the station to the number of traffic tickets officers were supposed to write.

"It got to a point that I think he would look for things to pick at, complain about, and it wasn't just with me ... He has a couple sets of rules and doesn't manage all the people the same way. He's critical with some and lenient with others," he said.

Dale A. Childs, who left the department after she settled a workers' compensation claim against the town, said Chief Consentino worried about losing control of the department after the town hired Mr. Daniels as the town's first full-time officer. When she was a member of the Budget Committee and didn't "rubber stamp" his budget, Mrs. Childs said Chief Consentino started firing memos at her and questioning her police work.

When asked about the negative statements, Chief Consentino acted both angry and hurt. He refused to comment on Mrs. Childs and said Mr. Daniels left without giving a notice and wiped 12 years of information from the computer system before he left.

Mr. Daniels said he never deleted anything from the computers. He didn't give a notice because, he said, Chief Consentino didn't deserve one.

Chief Consentino said he manages the department like any other administrator would. He tells his officers when they are doing something wrong, keeps an open door for them to voice complaints and never "micromanages" day-to-day operations.

"If an officer handles a case and handles it poorly, shouldn't the officer be told he made a mistake?" asked Chief Consentino. "That's my job."

After his officers voted, the chief, standing taller than 6 feet, denied allegations and, in a press conference, challenged the officers to look him directly in the eye and tell him to his face that he ever intimidated officers.

In going over a list of 43 full- and part-time officers who have left the department during his time as chief, he vividly recalled reasons why nearly everyone left.

Some got more money working at bigger departments, while others were "too aggressive for the town of Atkinson" stopping cars left and right prompting residents to complain. Others, he acknowledges, left because they were unhappy with the way he ran things.

"You can't please everyone," he said.

For each departed officer, he has a different characterization. He called them everything from a "hell of a good kid," to "screwed up," a "nightmare and a half" or a "hell of a good cop."

Regardless of who they are, Chief Consentino said he welcomes his officers into the department, creating positions for them, accommodating their busy schedules and introducing them to police work. He said the officers work in a "country club" atmosphere when compared to other departments.

The chief recounted how he gave one officer a paycheck advance of \$400 so he could pay his mortgage.

"So many of these guys would not be where they are today if Phil Consentino hadn't taken them in and got them started on their police (careers)," the chief said.

Mr. DeRosa said he has seen Chief Consentino "bend over backward" for some of his officers. He also said he saw Chief Consentino delay giving officers raises or appointments because he felt they were too immature.

"He would kind of drag it on a little bit just to get the person acclimated to the rules and regulations that you need to abide by and I can't say he hasn't ever used that as a wedge," Mr. DeRosa said. "He has."

Despite his detractors, four former and one current officer interviewed by The Eagle-Tribune said Chief Consentino is fair.

"I always found him to be behind the officers over there," said Robert S. Donovan, a former Newton police chief who went to work part time in Atkinson after he retired as a full-time Rockingham County sheriff's deputy. "I never saw a problem."

"I have never seen the chief out of control or rude to anyone," said Vincent N. Scarvaglieri, a part-time Atkinson officer.

"The town is extremely lucky to have him," said William Bennett, who worked 15 years as a part-time officer and left for health reasons. "He runs a good department and he doesn't get the rewards for the effort he puts in."

But the public skirmishes that have been present throughout the decade are taking their toll on the chief.

Two years ago, Chief Consentino accused former selectman Fred J. Childs, the husband of Dale A. Childs, of spitting in his face. But selectmen reprimanded the chief for calling Mr. Childs a "jerk."

Chief Consentino, who crafts wooden toys and takes care of his Holsteins, Guido and Vido, when he's not working, said he's tired of being pulled into the center of attention. He doesn't know how much longer he will stay. What he wants from his job is to be able to come into the station, do bookkeeping, take care of the senior citizens and go home.

"Lt. (Robert) Woodbury told me, 'Phil, when the fun is gone it's time to get out of the department,' " said Chief Consentino. "It's getting close. It really is."