

Decatur deputies help patrol after shooting

Officers from the Decatur County Sheriff's Department have been covering the north part of Sheridan County after the death of the Sheridan County sheriff last week.

Decatur County Sheriff Ken Badsky said as soon as his office found out about the shooting and death of Sheriff Jim Johnson on Thursday, the officers here started to fill in.

Sheriff Badsky said he called Sheridan County on Thursday and asked if they needed help with anything. Since then, he said, the Decatur County officers have been

patrolling the Selden area several times a day.

The two counties do have a mutual aid agreement, said Sheriff Badsky, but it doesn't cover patrolling. If another county needs help, he said, then nearby officers pitch in to help. It's a professional courtesy, he said.

Since the shooting, Sheriff Badsky added, he's decided to tighten security on the fourth floor of the courthouse.

Anyone wanting to come to the sheriff's office, dispatch or to the jail needs to either use the elevator or the west stairway of the

courthouse, he said. They will still need to be buzzed in and sign in.

Sheriff Badsky said anyone who wants to enter will be patted down for weapons.

The fourth floor has been locked for a couple of years, he said, but now there is going to be more security.

The Decatur County officers joined law officers and dispatchers from surrounding area counties who pitched in to handle things in Hoxie.

"Various agencies are providing patrol and dispatching," said KBI Deputy Director Kyle Smith during a late-morning press

conference in downtown Hoxie. "It would be easier to name agencies which aren't helping out than those who are."

Smith said dispatchers from across northwest Kansas will be taking shifts to help out in Hoxie. And he said the Kansas Highway Patrol would help patrol for Gove County Sheriff Allan Weber of Quinter, who is interim sheriff for Sheridan County.

"I've talked with Steven's mother, Mary Reitcheck," Smith said, "and she expressed her condolences to the Johnson family, as well as to the community."

Mayor Lori Horesky, Hoxie Police Chief

John Bieker and Sheridan County Attorney Mike Haas talked about the town being "in shock."

"It's going to take a long time to heal from this, if they ever do," Bieker said.

Sheridan County Undersheriff Brian Fenner was at the sheriff's office Friday morning, but was not available for comment. Kansas Attorney General Phill Kline was in Hoxie to visit families of the victims.

Kline said he had asked Gov. Sebelius to order flags be flown at half staff at the Memorial Building, which houses his office, and at KBI headquarters.

Victim was interviewing man about mental problems

By JAN KATZ ACKERMAN
Colby Free Press

The shooting death of Sheridan County Sheriff Jim Johnson on Thursday apparently came as a surprise, investigators say, and in the laid-back atmosphere of a small town, the sheriff was without his bulletproof vest.

"Sheriff Johnson was interviewing Steven Reitcheck, a person he'd known all his life, and (Reitcheck) had agreed to commit himself," said Kyle Smith, deputy director of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation.

The killer apparently had been distraught over the death of his father, Leroy Reitcheck, killed in a hit-and-run accident caused by a drunk driver in June of 2003.

Smith called the man's recent behavior "bizarre." Last week, Steven Reitcheck apparently tried to dig up his father's body. In September, he allegedly smashed the headstone at his father's grave at St. Frances Cemetery west of Hoxie.

Sheriff Johnson was talking with Mr. Reitcheck, 35, about a self-commitment for mental health care shortly after 1 p.m. in the sheriff's office. Mr. Smith said though Mr. Reitcheck had agreed to commit himself.

"At some point, the young man was asked to take off his coat, and from then it deteriorated," Mr. Smith said. "Mr. Reitcheck pulled a handgun and shot Sheriff Johnson."

Mr. Smith said Sheriff Johnson had known Mr. Reitcheck well and apparently did not believe he posed a threat. Mr. Reitcheck had no known criminal history and no one

knew why he had a gun.

While Sheriff Johnson was talking with Mr. Reitcheck, Undersheriff Brian Fenner and at least one other deputy were in the room. Mr. Smith said after Mr. Reitcheck agreed to get mental help, the undersheriff left to make arrangements. That's when the shooting began.

The deputy, who Mr. Smith refused to name, shot Mr. Reitcheck. The officer has been placed on administrative leave, Mr. Smith said.

Mr. Smith said Sheriff Johnson was not wearing a bulletproof vest, adding that many officers in small towns do not see any reason to.

"Forty-eight percent of sheriff offices in Kansas have five or fewer officers," he said. "Sometimes we get a little casual, and not wearing a vest is not uncommon."

Mr. Smith said members of Sheriff Johnson's staff on Thursday night were referred to psychologists from the Kansas Highway Patrol.

"There was a peer support group available (Thursday) night in an effort to minimize damage done in incidents like this," he said. "These are people you work with, attend meetings with and even play golf with or occasionally have a beer with, but this is all part of the job."

Autopsies on both Sheriff Johnson and Mr. Reitcheck were done Friday in Hays, Mr. Smith said, and preliminary reports could be available within a few days. It could be several weeks to get toxicology reports, which could determine whether Mr. Reitcheck was under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Mr. Smith said once the bureau completes its investigation, reports

would be turned over to Sheridan County Attorney Mike Haas, who is expected to make a final statement about the shooting. Mr. Haas said Sheriff Johnson's murder is the first homicide in Sheridan County since he became county attorney in 1972.

Sheriff Johnson and his deputies were interviewing Mr. Reitcheck in the two-story blonde brick building which houses the sheriff's office and jail. The office is on the west side of the building, next to a second office, the evidence room, a break room and the dispatcher's office. The jail is on the second floor; across the parking lot to the northwest of the Sheridan County Courthouse. The tree-shaded complex is a block west of downtown Hoxie.

Shortly after the shootings, yellow police tape stretched from the building out to the two trees west of the office. The sheriff's blood-covered chair sat in the middle of the roped-off section.

Deputy Hessel Anderson, asked if it was true the sheriff had been shot and killed, said Sheriff Johnson had been shot, adding that he couldn't say anything else.

Kansas Highway Patrol troopers arrived, parking their cars in the intersection just to the northwest of the sheriff's office to block traffic.

Graham County Undersheriff Melanie Scott arrived and left about 4:30 p.m., as did Decatur County Attorney Steve Hirsch.

After the shooting, Sheriff Johnson was taken by a Sheridan County ambulance to Colby, where he was to be airlifted to a larger hospital.

However, police there said he was pronounced dead about 3:20 p.m.



UNDERSHERIFF BRIAN FENNER (right) and KBI Agent Bruce Mellor left the Sheridan County sheriff's office late Thursday afternoon after Sheriff Jim Johnson was killed by a man he was interviewing.

— Colby Free Press photo by Jan Katz Ackerman

* 1,700 expected at officer's funeral

(Continued from Page 1A)

"There will be parking at the elementary school and buses will shuttle people to Sheriff Johnson's funeral at the high school," Mr. Moses said. "Buses will be parked on the northeast side of the grade school by the gymnasium entrance."

Mr. Moses said part of his work included preparing for news reporters who will cover the funeral.

"I'm working on the details," he said. "We know where we plan to have the media's trucks with the big satellite dishes parked so far."

At Hoxie High School on Mon-

day, a crew from Cox Communications of Hays was running lines to feed coverage of the funeral from the auditorium to the gymnasium, where officials plan to send the overflow.

Harm Briery, manager of the Hoxie cable system for Cox, was overseeing the project.

After Johnson's death on Thursday, political wheels were turning in the background in Hoxie.

Sheriff Weber said Saturday morning he has talked with Sheridan County Undersheriff Brian Fenner about Mr. Fenner accepting an ap-

pointment by the Republican Party to finish out Johnson's term., which has two years left on it.

"We've visited about it a little bit," Sheriff Weber said, "but he just hasn't made a decision."

Doren Follis, Sheridan County Republican chairman, said Saturday morning said he's checking into the procedures of filling the vacancy.

He said while the county needs time to grieve the loss of Johnson, it too must move forward.

"It's a sad thing that happened," Mr. Follis said, "and we'll have to get it taken care of soon."

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