

South River P.D. Embarks on Accreditation Journey

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SOUTH RIVER — The borough police department is working toward becoming a state-accredited law enforcement agency. Only 44 of New Jersey's 584 police departments have earned the accreditation. Police Chief John Bouthillette said this was one of his goals since becoming acting chief last year. "We at first thought we could handle this in-house with a lieutenant and sergeant; however, we underestimated the process," he said. "This is no easy undertaking." That is when Bouthillette consulted with Lt. Colonel Frank E. Rodgers, who retired as the deputy superintendent of the New Jersey State Police in 2007. Rodgers owns a private consulting company, The Rodgers Group LLC of Island Heights, which has been instrumental in helping police departments such as those in Atlantic City and Edison receive accreditation status, as well as helping the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office become the first to be nationally recognized by the Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) and the first to be accredited by the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police.

The retired state police lieutenant was on hand at the Feb. 22 Borough Council meeting to explain what the accreditation process entails. He noted that the most recent department to become accredited was the Edison Police Department. That department has had its share of challenges over the years, but became an accredited law enforcement agency in November after an 11-month effort. Rodgers explained that, on average, departments could take up to 35 months to complete the accreditation process; however, with the consultation, the time frame can be reduced by a third. The Rodgers Group comprises credentialed and experienced law enforcement experts who can provide services including assessing a police department's current level of compliance and develop a plan of action to achieve full compliance with each accreditation standard. It can review the department's written directives to determine if it meets compliance, and propose changes or amendments to standards.

Bouthillette said the accreditation is a journey for his department of 32 officers. "This is a self-assessment for us, and the hardest part for me is opening ourselves up to what is bad, what is wrong," he said. "It won't be easy anticipating what is going to be recommended, but this process will bring us to another level of professionalism." Once the department gets accredited, the status lasts for three years, after which the department has to submit annual reports on compliance, Bouthillette said. The police chief explained that accreditation would benefit the borough in the long term when it comes to lawsuits against the police department. "The first question a defense lawyer will ask is if your police department is accredited," he said. "The accreditation will make it hard for a lawyer to litigate." Rodgers said there was a 67 percent drop in lawsuits after the New Jersey State Police became an accredited agency. Bouthillette said his department has sent a letter to Middlesex County Prosecutor Bruce Kaplan asking if the borough department could use the prosecutor's seizure of funds from drug arrests toward the accreditation process.

Mayor Raymond T. Eppinger and the council said they were supportive of the department's move toward accreditation.