

Elder won't let Springs-based consultant finish assessment on department until after election By:

Rachel Riley Aug 30, 2018 Updated 45 min ago



Unless he's re-elected, El Paso County Sheriff Bill Elder won't consider giving a consultant the go-ahead to finish a report that could shed light on how much progress has been made on recommended changes during his first term.

A Colorado Springs-based consulting firm has completed a draft of an assessment evaluating the sheriff's progress on a set of 40 recommendations that the same firm made four years ago for improving policies and procedures related to the jail, leadership and culture among the ranks and many other aspects of the agency.

The tips offered by KRW Associates in its original 2015 report have helped precipitate notable changes within the sheriff's Detention Bureau, including strengthened policies regarding use of force on inmates and changes in the jail's food and health care contractors.

But it's unclear how far the sheriff has gotten on many of the more than three dozen recommendations — which also include measures to improve staff disciplinary procedures, supervisory training efforts and record keeping.

The sheriff has declined to release the draft of the follow-up assessment to The Gazette, telling a reporter in June that it is still a “working document.” He told The Gazette that the report, which was initially slated for completion months earlier, had become less of a priority with other goings-on at the agency, including the death of Deputy Micah Flick.

He said that, if elected, he would consider asking KRW Associates to proceed with the final phases.

Elder will face Democratic candidate Grace Sweeney-Maurer in the Nov. 6 election; however, with his status as an incumbent and a conservative, he appears headed toward re-election in the heavily Republican county.

In an email statement, he reiterated Wednesday that he doubted he would push for progress on the assessment until after the election — and possibly not until after the new year — saying “my concern is that I choreograph changes I am making to the Sheriff's Office properly, not just make them quickly.”

“We are also developing leadership training that will coincide with our findings from the assessment,” Elder said. “With recent retirements of a number of key senior staff, the subsequent promotions and personnel changes, as well as additional moves I anticipate in the near future, it is KRW's recommendation (and I agree), that I wait until after the movement of staff is concluded before I begin scheduling additional meetings and assessment center work.”

He added that, if his contender wins, she might not agree with his staff placements.

The Sheriff's Office has paid nearly \$15,000 for the second assessment, which includes another 52 recommendations, according to an invoice from KRW Associates. The firm noted in a January letter to the sheriff, which the agency provided to The Gazette, that finishing the report would likely add to that cost.

The invoice noted that, as part of the first phase of the follow-up assessment, the firm has heard presentations from staff members responsible for implementing the original recommendations, reviewed documents and conducted nearly a dozen focus groups involving more than 140 of the agency's employees.

Questions about the follow-up report's status, first raised by Gazette news partner KKTV in a story published online on Monday night, come as the sheriff grapples with a record-breaking inmate population at a jail that has long been understaffed.

His office has also faced claims of subpar inmate care after switching from one private, for profit health care provider to another — Correct Care Solutions to Armor Correctional Health Services — last year. The transition came with a more than 40 percent increase in the cost to provide inmate medical services.

The jail also faced a surge in inmate complaints about meals in 2016 after changing from its longtime food contractor, Aramark Correctional Services, to Trinity Services Group.

Sheriff's Officials have said that dissatisfaction among some inmates is common in such transitions.

KRW Associates' initial roughly 135-page report had recommended that the agency request bids from contractors to ensure that it's getting the best deal for taxpayer dollars.

As a result of the 2015 report and another done by the same firm in 2016, training efforts have been bolstered to educate deputies about de-escalation techniques that can be used before deputies resort to using force on an inmate, and many now participate in special programs — such as Crisis Intervention Training — that give them skills to better deal with mentally ill inmates.

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