



**SHERIFF LEMMA'S PREPARED REMARKS
SEMINOLE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE PROPOSED BUDGET PRESENTATION
TUESDAY, JUNE 27, 2025**

Chairman, Commissioners, County Manager, and Staff — thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for your ongoing leadership and your continued commitment to fiscal responsibility. Each of you has consistently demonstrated a thoughtful, disciplined approach to balancing the essential needs of this community while being mindful stewards of taxpayer dollars. As a fiscal conservative, I share your values and appreciate the challenges that you face in maintaining that balance.

The meetings and conversations I have held with you over the past couple of weeks have been incredibly productive and meaningful, particularly in a year when my budget request comes with a significant increase.

Each of you has approached these conversations after reviewing what we submit to you and, in many cases, asking for additional documentation. Our residents deserve to know that our ongoing partnership and shared commitment to transparency have resulted in us providing more detailed information than ever before. I want to commend you on your increased interest in this process.

I am submitting the proposed budget for the Seminole County Sheriff's Office for Fiscal Year 2025–2026, which reflects a 9% increase year-over-year. As we have discussed, I fully recognize that our agency represents more than half of the overall general fund budget. However, approximately 40%, or \$80 million, of that supports correctional facility operations, county probation, school safety, the juvenile detention center, and juvenile court programs, commonly referred to as BCC vested services. These arrangements entrust the Sheriff's Office with addressing crime, safety, recidivism through corrective behavior, and re-entry programs, as it aligns with my constitutional responsibilities.



This proposed increase is driven by the compensation market, not a reflection of excess, but of necessity. For the first time in my tenure as Sheriff, this request exceeds the annual growth in property tax revenues. This increase is personnel-focused, which you know takes up about 85% of our overall budget. Even when we are experiencing increases in material costs, we present no increases in capital or operational outlays.

Across the State of Florida, support for public safety professionals has gone beyond rhetoric; our state leaders have taken bold action to attract qualified candidates. The legislature and Governor DeSantis have introduced numerous incentive programs to recruit law enforcement from across the country. Municipalities and counties followed suit, creating highly competitive compensation packages. As a result, within the past 12 months, the starting salary for a deputy sheriff has fallen to one of the lowest amongst local law enforcement agencies in Seminole County, currently \$8,500 below the highest.

Regionally, neighboring agencies offer significantly higher starting salaries than Seminole County. In recent years, I have focused on comparisons to our peer agencies within Seminole County. However, a fair comparison should also be made against other sheriff's offices with similar population sizes, responsibilities, and socioeconomic characteristics across the state. These are important comparisons to make, and agencies from across the state are finding themselves in similar situations.

I remain extremely grateful that the Board has worked closely with us over the years to stay competitive. But the market has changed. Agencies are now offering significant signing bonuses, along with adjusted base salaries with experience. The reality is that deputies are now financially incentivized and recruited to change agencies every few years, collecting signing bonuses and maintaining their seniority pay. This is creating a cycle of attrition and competition that has been seen in other professions; however, it is relatively new to policing.

The workforce is also evolving. Fewer recruits seek long-term careers in policing. Many possess undergraduate and graduate degrees, military service, or private-sector experience. They serve proudly, but often transition within a few years because of the skills learned on the job that are often incredibly lucrative in the

private sector. That's the new reality. Our job is to adapt and make the most of their service while they are here.

It costs between \$144,000 and \$214,000 to onboard and properly train a deputy. Employee attrition is a significant loss of taxpayer-funded investment. Our 9% increase includes 6% for fair and competitive compensation and 1.5% for overtime, which is heavily used during onboarding and corrections backfill, which remains one of the hardest areas to staff. Though we have seen recruitment success with our academy, our team remains committed and professional, even though recruitment and retention have proven difficult. However, we expect these costs to normalize as more recruits complete training, including the nearly 40 cadets graduating from our academy and being sworn in later today. Another 1% goes towards increasing contributions to the Florida Retirement System, and less than 1% to healthcare costs. We aim to ensure fair and competitive compensation for the men and women serving our community.

Our team has reviewed the agency structure and daily operations to identify potential reductions that would not negatively impact public safety. Earlier this year, we strategically consolidated two divisions to increase efficiency without compromising service, while at the same time, we were able to eliminate one senior-level captain position. We have converted sworn positions into civilian investigators, in areas such as major crimes and digital forensics, knowing that their total compensation package is lower than a sworn position.

We will continue to look to civilianize positions, as long as it does not jeopardize overall safety and operations. Using volunteers, over 40,000 hours were given back in 2024 alone, equating to over 20 full-time-equivalent positions. We continue to utilize nontraditional resources, grants, and partnerships to support our agency. As we move forward, we will continue to examine every possible cost-saving strategy. I want to reaffirm that I am fully prepared to walk through each division in detail to explain their critical functions, as I have in years past, and as outlined in our current presentation today.

Our Community Engagement and Crime Prevention sections remain integral to our crime-fighting success, as do our organization's investments in prevention programs, particularly surrounding our youth. Seminole County remains one of the



safest counties because of our proactive efforts to regularly develop relationships and connect with law-abiding residents, deter victimization, and reduce the fear of crime. In part, this is why we experienced a 20.3% decrease in our unincorporated crime rate just last year, and approximately a 53% decrease over the past eight years.

Long before state or federal mandates were implemented, and in direct partnership with Seminole County Public Schools, together, we chose to assign a professionally trained deputy sheriff or police officer to every public school campus, rather than solely utilizing a guardian program. These deputies not only ensure safety but also investigate crimes, build trust with our youth, and serve as mentors and positive role models.

We also recognize that there is a high level of uncertainty at both the state and federal levels when it comes to funding, particularly in grants and reimbursement programs. The Seminole County Sheriff's Office has always stood ready with our partners at the Seminole County Fire Department, Emergency Management, and other public safety entities to prepare for and respond to emergencies; that does not change. Additionally, we know that some programs that have previously provided funding and grants may no longer be able to, or at a minimum will be reduced, particularly regarding drug trafficking operations. Together, we prepare and plan for whatever lies around the corner.

As mentioned, we've implemented division consolidation, civilianization, overtime controls, and position elimination. But market pressures have outpaced our efforts. This budget is about preserving what we've built. It's about ensuring Seminole County remains a destination for top-tier public safety professionals and that the services expected by Seminole County residents are not compromised.

The risks of inaction are clear: without adequate resources, we run the risk of losing capable, well-trained personnel. As a result, morale can suffer, overtime costs will rise, and community safety could be jeopardized.

I understand that difficult decisions lie ahead. We have had very candid and honest conversations about the options on the table. However, my responsibility as Sheriff



is to respond to the unique market dynamics affecting law enforcement. The market for sworn personnel has changed dramatically in recent years. While it's easy to make surface-level comparisons across roles in government, the reality is that law enforcement recruitment and retention challenges are being driven by market forces well outside of our control. Adjustments must be made in accordance with fair market value, and our current challenge is to ensure that the men and women serving on the front lines of public safety are not left behind.

I am confident that the citizens of Seminole County will continue to support the men and women of law enforcement who raise their hands and take an oath to protect our domestic freedoms, keep our community safe, and continue to enjoy the quality of life we are accustomed to. I know the Board has strongly supported these heroes, and you are proud of their work.

I will submit that it is an investment in our safety, stability, and long-term fiscal health, as the cost of not keeping up is more significant in the long term than keeping pace.

In accordance with the requirements set forth in Florida State Statutes, Chapter 30.49, and in fulfillment of my constitutional responsibilities, I respectfully submit the Seminole County Sheriff's Office Proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2025/2026. The total proposed certified budget is \$196,015,000, representing a 9% increase over the current fiscal year. The budget is reasonable and necessary for the proper and efficient operation of the Seminole County Sheriff's Office. This increase is attributable to essential investments in personnel—our single greatest asset—in response to sustained labor market challenges impacting law enforcement agencies across Florida and the nation.

Thank you for your partnership, stewardship, and continued commitment to the people of Seminole County. I am happy to answer any questions or proceed with a slide-by-slide presentation of our budget.