

# BUILDING THE FORCE:

## *AN ANALYSIS OF FLORIDA'S LAW ENFORCEMENT APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM (LEAP)*

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MARCH 2026



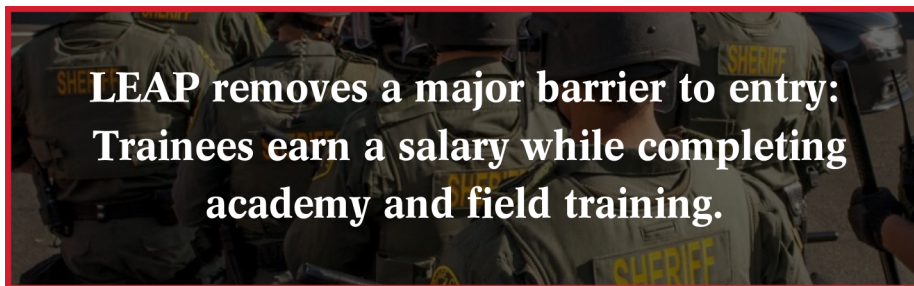
**DEPUTY**  
**SHERIFF**

## INTRODUCTION

Public safety remains a fundamental priority for Florida communities. Across the state, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, law enforcement agencies face ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified officers. The traditional path into law enforcement requires candidates to attend academy training at their own expense, creating financial barriers for capable individuals who cannot afford to forgo employment while pursuing law enforcement careers.

Florida has invested \$3.25 million in state funding to support the Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program (LEAP), an approach that addresses these workforce challenges through an “earn and learn” model. This brief examines how LEAP operates, the positive results it has achieved to date, and the rationale for continued program investment. The program currently serves 25 Sheriff’s Offices with 117 registered apprentices who receive salaries while completing their training. In rural counties, the program enables local residents to participate in law enforcement careers without relocating and participating agencies have reported meaningful improvements in staffing levels.

The program has experienced strong demand that exceeds available funding, with waiting lists developing as appropriations are depleted, demonstrating the value agencies place on this program. As Florida continues to experience population growth and welcomes more than 143 million tourists annually, effective workforce development for law enforcement agencies represents a sound investment in public safety.



1 Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association, “Apprenticeship,” retrieved from <https://fldeputysheriffs.org/apprenticeship/>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

2 Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association, “The Growing Impact of Florida’s only Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program Sponsored by the Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association,” 2023.

3 Project 10, “Apprenticeships: A time tested pathway to careers through on the job training,” retrieved from <https://project10.info/DetailPagePrint.php?ID=315>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

4 Supra, see footnote 1.

## THE FOUNDATION AND GROWTH OF LEAP

Florida’s Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program (LEAP) offers an innovative solution to one of the most pressing challenges facing law enforcement agencies today: recruiting and training qualified officers while removing financial barriers that prevent capable candidates from entering the profession. As Florida’s sole registered law enforcement apprenticeship initiative, LEAP provides a structured pathway combining paid employment with comprehensive training, allowing aspiring officers to pursue their calling without sacrificing financial stability.<sup>1</sup> The program represents a collaborative effort involving the Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association, Jackson County Sheriff’s Office, the Florida Public Safety Institute at Tallahassee State College, and the Florida Department of Education, officially implemented in June 2023.<sup>2</sup> Operating as a registered apprenticeship, LEAP meets both state and federal requirements, including a minimum of 144 hours of related instruction for each year of apprenticeship, with participants engaging in preparation that blends classroom learning at certified academies with hands on field training.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional pathways into law enforcement often present significant obstacles for those lacking financial resources. Academy tuition, living expenses during unpaid training periods, and the inability to maintain employment while attending full time programs create barriers that exclude many qualified candidates. LEAP eliminates these challenges through its “earn and learn” structure, enabling trainees to receive regular paychecks while acquiring the skills and certifications needed for law enforcement careers.<sup>4</sup> Since its launch, LEAP has experienced remarkable expansion. The program now serves 25 Sheriff’s Offices statewide, with 117 registered apprentices actively enrolled. This rapid adoption reflects growing recognition among Florida law enforcement agencies that LEAP provides effective workforce development strategy.

The financial investment in LEAP has yielded substantial returns. Working with Senate President Ben Albritton, LEAP received \$750,000 in appropriations for the 2024 to 2025 program year, supporting the training of seven jail-assigned deputies and 36 deputy sheriffs across 16 counties.<sup>5</sup> For Fiscal Year 2025-26, this appropriation increased significantly to \$2.5 million, enabling the training of 74 deputy sheriffs across 16 counties.<sup>6</sup> The total investment of \$3.25 million in state funding establishes LEAP as an economically viable solution for developing Florida's law enforcement workforce.<sup>7</sup> The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) administers these funds, providing reimbursements to Sheriff's Offices for trainee salaries, benefits, tuition, and academy related fees.<sup>8</sup> For agencies located in fiscally constrained counties, eligible expenses also include essential equipment such as uniforms, body armor, duty belts, weapons, and technology needed for field operations.<sup>9</sup>

## ADDRESSING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

LEAP has proven particularly valuable in rural and economically challenged regions of Florida, where law enforcement faces unique obstacles. These communities often experience workforce drain as residents relocate to areas offering better economic opportunities, while limited local budgets make it difficult for rural sheriffs' offices to compete with larger agencies in metropolitan areas, creating persistent staffing shortages. The apprenticeship model addresses these challenges by enabling local residents to pursue law enforcement careers without leaving their communities. Individuals with families who need stable income to meet daily financial obligations can now enter the profession without choosing between supporting their households and attending training programs, creating significant advantages as local talent remains within the region and agencies recruit officers who already possess deep understanding of and connection to the communities they will serve.

Washington County Sheriff Kevin Crews highlighted the program's transformative impact on his rural jurisdiction. One prospective deputy had aspired to be in law enforcement for three years but remained unable to afford to leave his existing employment to attend academy training full-time. Through LEAP, this individual resigned from his previous position in another county and enrolled in the law enforcement academy, fulfilling a longstanding career goal while serving his home community.<sup>10</sup> Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods emphasized how the program serves those answering a calling to law enforcement. Many candidates, particularly young single parents, already work jobs that pay their bills and provide for their children.



**LEAP is Florida's only registered law enforcement apprenticeship program, Meeting both state and federal apprenticeship standards.**

<sup>5</sup> Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association, "Largest Budget, New Leadership and First FDSA Conference," August 17, 2024, retrieved from <https://fldeputysheriffs.org/news/largest-budget-new-leadership-and-first-fdsa-conference/>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Supra, see footnote 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Florida Department of Law Enforcement, "Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program (LEAP)," retrieved from <https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/fdle-grants/open-funding-opportunities/leap-1/leap>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Vecerina, "Florida sheriffs praise benefits of paid deputy apprenticeship program, seek expansion," Florida's Voice, February 13, 2025, retrieved from <https://flvoicenews.com/florida-sheriffs-praise-benefits-of-paid-deputy-apprenticeship-program-seek-expansion/>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

Traditional academy requirements make it nearly impossible for these individuals to pursue their law enforcement aspirations without abandoning their financial responsibilities. LEAP removes this barrier, making the profession accessible to individuals who bring valuable life experience and community connections to their roles.<sup>11</sup> Sheriff Crews noted that, for fiscally constrained counties, the program significantly reduces budgetary stress, freeing resources while enabling individuals to pursue full time training. This dual benefit strengthens both agency capacity and officer preparedness, creating sustainable workforce development in communities that have historically struggled with recruitment and retention.<sup>12</sup>

## CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND CAREER PATHWAYS

LEAP has contributed to meaningful demographic shifts in law enforcement recruitment, attracting candidates who previously found the profession inaccessible, including those with family obligations seeking stable and long-term employment. By removing financial barriers, LEAP opens doors for a more diverse pool of candidates who bring varied life experiences and community connections to their roles as law enforcement officers.

Data gathered from LEAP's enrollment shows that, across the program's current apprentices, nearly one-in-five participants are female and racial and ethnic minorities make up approximately eight percent of apprentices. Additionally, about eight percent declined to identify their race, suggesting the true level of diversity may be even higher. These figures are significant when compared to traditional law enforcement recruitment, where new hires have historically been overwhelmingly white males in their 20s. The demographic shift extends beyond race and gender as well; LEAP is reaching a different age group entirely. Of LEAP apprentices, 34 percent are age 30 or older at the start of the apprenticeship, and nine percent are 40 or above, with the oldest apprentice entering at age 55.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Supra, see footnote 2.

<sup>14</sup> Supra, see footnote 8.

<sup>15</sup> Jobs for the Future, "The National Apprentice Fund, Supported by Google.org," June 25, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.jff.org/blog/new-opportunity-financial-assistance-for-apprentices/>, accessed on January 26, 2026.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Supra, see footnote 10.

In an industry where career entry has long been dominated by younger recruits fresh out of academy, LEAP is opening the door to career changers, parents, and community members with decades of life experience who bring a depth of perspective.

## MEETING DEMAND AND FUTURE EXPANSION

Despite significant funding increases, demand for LEAP consistently exceeds available resources. In 2025, requests surpassed available funds, resulting in 53 aspiring apprentices across eight Sheriff's Offices remaining unfunded due to early depletion of program funds.<sup>13</sup> By October 3, 2025, FDLE announced that all available funding for the fiscal year had been claimed on a first-come, first served basis, with interested applicants added to a waiting list.<sup>14</sup> This overwhelming response demonstrates the critical need for sustained and expanded investment in the program.

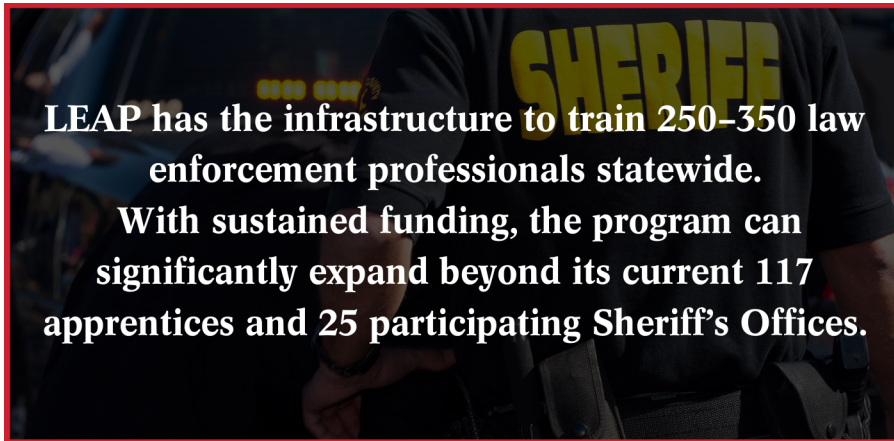
National research on apprenticeship programs validates LEAP's approach, showing that financial obstacles remain a primary reason why apprentices fail to complete their programs.<sup>15</sup> Organizations have launched initiatives, like the National Apprentice Fund, to provide financial assistance directly to apprentices, recognizing that reducing financial stress enables more people to complete registered apprenticeships and strengthens the overall workforce.<sup>16</sup> Before LEAP, some medium sized agencies reported significant deputy shortages, but after implementing the program alongside other recruitment efforts, these agencies achieved over hire status, dramatically improving their operational capacity and service delivery.<sup>17</sup>

With continued state funding, LEAP is positioned for significant growth. Program leadership has outlined plans to add 10 to 20 additional Sheriff's Offices while supporting training for 250 to 350 law enforcement professionals statewide.<sup>18</sup> Beyond deputy sheriffs and jail-assigned deputies, future expansion includes additional public safety occupations, further strengthening Florida's statewide workforce pipeline. This expansion holds particular significance for Florida, which annually welcomes more than 143 million tourists.<sup>19</sup> Maintaining public safety for both residents and tourists requires well trained, adequately staffed law enforcement workforce agencies. LEAP provides a sustainable mechanism ensuring agencies can recruit, train, and retain the personnel necessary to meet these demands. LEAP's structure aligns with best practices in workforce development. It provides hands on training, mentorship, and clear advancement pathways, all characteristics of successful apprenticeship programs.<sup>20</sup> By combining paid employment with comprehensive training, LEAP creates a mutually beneficial scenario where agencies gain dedicated, well-prepared officers and individuals gain access to stable, meaningful careers in public service.

## THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS

Beyond immediate workforce development benefits, apprenticeship programs like LEAP deliver substantial long-term financial returns through improved employee retention and reduced turnover costs. National data on registered apprenticeship programs provides compelling evidence for these economic advantages. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, registered apprenticeship programs achieve a 90 percent retention rate after program completion, exceeding the national average employee turnover rate of 47 percent.<sup>21</sup> This retention translates directly into cost savings for participating agencies.

The return on investment for apprenticeship programs has been extensively documented. A U.S. Department of Labor study found that employers experience a median return of \$1.44 for every dollar invested in apprenticeship programs. Employers gain benefits both during and after the apprenticeship period, with the most significant returns coming from indirect benefits including reduced turnover, improved talent pipeline, employee loyalty, and enhanced workplace culture which contribute approximately \$25,000 to \$30,000 per apprentice after program completion.<sup>22</sup> When viewed as a statewide workforce investment, LEAP's combination of hands on training and high retention rates suggests that Florida's \$3.25 million appropriation represents a fiscally sound approach to developing the state's law enforcement workforce while gathering meaningful returns as officers' remain in service rather than needing replacement.



<sup>18</sup> Supra, see footnote 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jobs for the Future, "The National Apprentice Fund, Supported by Google.org."

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, "Expanding Apprenticeship," retrieved from <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-apprenticeship>, accessed on February 11, 2026; Walton, Douglas, Karen N. Gardiner, and Burt Barnow, "Expanding Apprenticeship to New Sectors and Populations: The Experiences and Outcomes of Apprentices in the American Apprenticeship Initiative," prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Rockville, MD: Abt Associates, 2022, retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED625833.pdf>, accessed on February 11, 2026.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Kuehn, Siobhan Mills De La Rosa, Robert Lerman, and Kevin Hollenback, "Do Employers Earn Positive Returns to Investments in Apprenticeship? Evidence from Registered Programs under the American Apprenticeship Initiative," Abt Associates and Urban Institute, September 2022, retrieved from [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/AAI/AAI\\_ROI\\_Final\\_Report\\_508\\_9-2022.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/AAI/AAI_ROI_Final_Report_508_9-2022.pdf), accessed on February 11, 2026.

## CONCLUSION

Florida's Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program registered and sponsored by the Florida Deputy Sheriffs Association has established itself as a valuable workforce development tool for law enforcement agencies across the state. Since becoming officially implemented in June 2023, the initiative has grown to encompass 25 participating Sheriff's Offices and 117 active apprentices, demonstrating its appeal as a training pathway. The earn and learn model successfully removes economic obstacles that historically prevented qualified individuals from entering law enforcement careers, enabling trainees to support themselves financially while gaining necessary skills and credentials. Over two fiscal years, the state has allocated \$3.25 million to the program, with funding levels rising substantially from \$750,000 initially to \$2.5 million, reflecting increased legislative confidence in the model.

For Sheriff's Offices operating in fiscally constrained counties, the reimbursement structure provides much needed budgetary assistance while simultaneously addressing staffing needs. The consistently high demand, evidenced by 53 unfunded applicants and rapid depletion of annual appropriations, signals strong statewide interest in this training approach. Testimonials from participating agencies indicate tangible staffing benefits, with some jurisdictions moving from understaffed to over-hire status. Looking ahead, program administrators have identified the infrastructure to expand training capacity between 250 to 350 law enforcement personnel annually, with possibilities for extending the model beyond deputy sheriffs and jail-assigned deputies to encompass additional public safety roles including emergency dispatchers, first responders, cyber intel planner, and law enforcement mental health peer specialists and mental health counselors.

For a state serving both a growing resident population and more than 143 million annual visitors, maintaining adequate law enforcement levels represents a critical policy priority. LEAP's documented performance, characterized by swift expansion, sustained demand from agencies, and favorable outcomes reported by participants, presents a compelling rationale for ongoing state investment in this workforce development strategy.

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### RESEARCH PROJECT TEAM

Rylan Clark  
Azariah Clemons

*Research Fellow* | Lead Author  
*Media Specialist* | Layout & Design

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106 N. Bronough St  
Tallahassee, FL 32301

o: 850.222.5052

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Contact President and CEO Jeff Kottkamp at [jkottkamp@floridataxwatch.org](mailto:jkottkamp@floridataxwatch.org)