

# VIRGINIA LAW ENFORCEMENT: A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

Law enforcement in Virginia has developed over the years from the only law enforcement officer being the Sheriff to multi jurisdictional departments with diverse assignments. Before America won it's independence from England the Sheriff was appointed by the English throne and his primary job was to collect taxes. After America became independent from English rule the Sheriff was still the only law enforcement in the state. However his job description began to change and he was looked to for enforcement of the laws. The Sheriff then was put in charge of maintaining a jail and it progressed from there to securing the courts and serving civil papers as well as enforcing the laws of the state and county. In the early 1800's police departments were formed in the more populated cities and was charged with most

law enforcement duties. Most Sheriff's Offices and Police Departments were very understaffed and there was very little training for the individual officers. Over the years through the dedication of the officers and the commitment of the organizations to the public, more training was provided for the officers. This training served to better organize, equip and serve the growing public. Training became more specialized in that it provided some officers with specialized skills that are utilized in crime prevention and detection. Some organizations provided a crime prevention division that works hand in hand with patrol and investigations divisions to be aware of certain crime patterns and areas of the community that needed more concentrated patrols and enforcement efforts. Crime prevention units also began administering programs to make the public aware of certain crime and how to prevent being a victim. Crime prevention units also provide the DARE program and other youth programs. There is a new program called G.R.E.A.T that serves to educate our youth

about the pitfalls of gang life. It is an effort to reduce gangs in the communities across the nation. The crime prevention units also go out into the community and give programs to citizen groups some times sponsored by civic or church groups.

We also see organizations that have personnel that are specialist in crime scene processing to ensure that evidence is properly collected and preserved. There are traffic divisions that primarily enforce traffic laws such as motor vehicle crashes and DUI offenses. Most jurisdictions have a narcotics division. Diversifying the agency has become a necessity because crime has become diverse. With the introduction of the personal computer and the Internet a whole new world of crime has opened up. Law enforcement agencies scrambled to train specialist in computer crimes.

Today we see the concept of community policing and how it really does work. Community policing came about when police organizations realized that they could tap into a wealth of

information from the public and at the same time give the citizens a sense of pride in their communities. Police officers cannot be everywhere and see everything, however by getting the citizens involved and encouraging them to give law enforcement information regarding crime, law enforcement agencies found they were able to solve more crime than ever before. The citizens were tired of the drug dealers, prostitutes and other criminals hanging out and operating in their communities at will. Soon the citizens found they could play a vital role in making their communities a safer place to live and raise a family. Law enforcement realized they had to take this one step further and assign officers to work certain areas where they got to know the residents. This served several purposes, in that the officers that worked these areas knew the people, their families, where they worked and who was creating the problems.

Community policing can be utilized in the ever-growing problems of terrorism and gangs. By knowing the citizens that live

in these areas the officer knows when someone new has moved in. It usually does not take long for the officer working a particular area to learn a little about these individuals.

My father has been a deputy sheriff for 31 years. He started out working in the jail and is now an investigator and one of two officers assigned to the gang unit. He says that when he first started out with the sheriff's office he never dreamed that law enforcement would evolve as it has. Thirty years ago alcohol was the main contributor to criminal activity, now narcotics plays into almost every crime in some way or another. He also says he never thought there would be a gang presence in our rural community but they are seeing more and more gang related issues.

My mother is also in the law enforcement field as a work release co-coordinator at the regional jail. She says that most of the inmates she has on her program came into correction facilities as narcotics violators. She also has seen an increase in gang activity within the regional jail. Correctional facilities are fast becoming a

great source of intelligence for law enforcement. Correctional officers are becoming valuable resources for this intelligence by gathering information from inmates and relaying the information back to law enforcement on the streets. Gang member's talk freely in the jails to the officers and other inmates and much can be learned from listening to them and passing this information to the proper units to take back to the streets of the community.

During recent times terrorism has become a top priority for law enforcement. One may think that terrorism would only affect the more populated areas of our country, however terrorist cells operate in rural communities as well. They believe they can exist and operate in the rural areas somewhat undetected. The local law enforcement organizations are being trained and are actively seeking out these individuals and their associates. Again this shows that law enforcement has a commitment to the community even on a global problem.

Virginia has made it a priority to provide efficient and quality

law enforcement to its communities through setting high standards of training. It also sets high standards for the day-to-day operation of the various law enforcement organizations within the state.

Each community benefits from these high standards. By having the citizens of the community involved in law enforcement through citizen committees and programs such as Neighborhood Watch crime rates can and are being reduced. Virginia has a strong commitment to incorporating citizen participation in community projects. It can be said there is strength in numbers and this is an example.