
Virginia Law Enforcement: A Commitment to Community

So often people fear the police. They see law enforcers as impersonal and almost predatory, lurking in the shadows to hand out a speeding ticket or worse. What these individuals do not understand, however, is the contribution of law enforcers to the cohesiveness of the community. Police officers and sheriffs not only protect valuables and property, they protect safety—and this sense of safety builds the basis for a healthy community. Without neighbors trusting neighbors and classmates trusting classmates, there exists no opportunity for respect. The presence and actions of Virginia law enforcers work constantly in order to provide an environment in which Virginia citizens can grow *without* fear, trusting that they will be protected and supported.

Charlottesville High School was hit hard by the recent violent attack by a group of CHS students on several students attending the University of Virginia. An overwhelming number of questions and concerns faced teachers and students: were the attacks motivated by hate? Did the violence point to larger racial tension within the school or within the town? Should we rethink our feeling of safety within CHS and the community?

These questions were addressed by a number of individuals and organizations, among them a CHS student discussion group, the media, and a community-based

discussion group. But most impressive in the situation was Charlottesville's police chief, Chief Longo. With discretion and skill, he addressed the indictments of David Duke, the leader of a White Supremacy organization, when Duke declared that the attacks were motivated by racial hatred. He encouraged the media and the public not to jump to conclusions, withholding information until the students had been questioned. Chief Longo not only steered the media into a more positive light regarding Charlottesville High School; he exhibited the Charlottesville Police Department's commitment to the community.

Local police officers and sheriffs throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia can only bring the sort of wisdom and support that Chief Longo brought to the Charlottesville community if they are supported themselves. The Virginia Coalition of Police and Sheriffs (VCOPS) provides this net of assistance for law enforcers, working, as the VCOPS website says, "Not only on behalf of its members, but also for all members of the Virginia law enforcement community." There is no way that police officers and sheriffs can contribute to the larger community of a region or town without feeling a strong sense of community themselves.

This pride in community felt by Virginia's law enforcement is manifested in many preventative educational programs throughout the state designed to reduce violence, drug addiction, and other crime. One of the most effective programs is Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), in which young adolescents learn the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and other destructive behaviors. The class goes deeper than the dangers of substance abuse, though—topics discussed include the importance of a healthy self-esteem, the importance of a close network of family and friends, and other elements that

contribute to a healthy life. The program emulates a safe community in itself, in which students are encouraged to discuss their own experiences, and ask questions of a trained police officer. In my own experience, the class was even topped off with a school-wide picnic at a local park, complete with water balloon fights and a band.

Virginia Law Enforcement supports communities throughout the Commonwealth. The simple idea that law enforcement holds society together was expressed even by the English philosopher John Locke, who explained that in order to protect the “inherent and inalienable natural rights of man,” a “police power has its origin in nature.” While this statement is seen most clearly in the executive branch of American government, it is echoed in the literal police powers of the states. Virginia Law Enforcement not only protects the rights of individuals; it helps to build communities that will remain supportive even in the face of challenges.