

“Virginia Law Enforcement: A Commitment to Community”

Law enforcement is a crucial aspect of the survival and well being of the citizens of Virginia. We rely on all the services that our policemen and women do for us everyday. We would not be able to function as a community or as a country without the assistance of these brave men and women. To have a successful community, the police force has many jobs on numerous levels; they must work with all ages of people and show themselves as friends to the people, not the enemy. Police officers must also know the people in the area so that they can effectively respond, solve, and prevent any crime they can.

It is important for all police officers to be a part of the lives of all children in their community. If kids know and are befriended by police from a young age on, then they will be more likely to understand their purpose; to serve and protect, not to arrest and detain. In my county, we have a program called D.A.R.E. in all elementary schools. This program educates the children of the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and peer pressure. At the same time, the children become familiar with one of our deputies. If each child sees that the police are available to help, this may help lessen the distance they feel from the law later in life.

In our middle schools, we have a program called Class Action that teaches 8th graders about different crimes in Virginia and what the punishments

for these crimes are. This allows our School Resource Officers to educate the teens on crimes that they are more likely to commit and to show them the consequences of these actions. Since teenagers are the most likely to commit vandalism, petty larcenies, and other small misdemeanors, these crimes are emphasized to get through to the students that these simple pranks are against the law and are punishable by law. The police officer in this instance is also shown as a friend to the students who is there to instruct and teach. These deputies make sure not to scare the students or to appear as an enemy to that age group.

School Resource Officers are also very important in building a strong community among young people. These officers are placed in the schools and are there to make sure everything runs smoothly while showing the students that the police are there to help and guide while protecting and enforcing the law. If this lesson is taught at a young age, then these young people will be less likely to rebel against the law as young adults.

The police officers of Virginia also become part of the community with adults. I have seen our deputies working personally with the people on friendly terms at local festivals and fairs. Our Sheriff's Office has a booth at every local fair. They are there to educate and are available to the people of our area and to answer any questions the citizens have. To build a strong community the police representatives at these fairs hand out pamphlets and flyers with tips on being safer citizens and advice on how to deal with criminals in your family or circle of friends. Every person at the fair can talk with the officers about problems or

concerns they have. This presence helps to convince the citizens that they may come to the police when they are suspicious or have a problem. Too many people are scared of getting involved with the police for fear of what will happen to themselves or their family. Sometimes they feel that they should deal with a problem themselves. The police that are out in the community talking show these doubtful people that when in trouble they should let the police handle the problem.

The police of Virginia are also active in helping promote safety in local businesses as well as at home. Our Crime Prevention office visits local businesses that have had a history of theft or crime. They make suggestions on lighting or what security measures should be considered. Along with this, the police help to organize and manage local neighborhood watch programs in various neighborhoods. Especially with the current homeland security problems, if the public can watch for suspicious people or actions taking place, they can help prevent a problem. The police officers of Virginia cannot be everywhere at one time, therefore, they get involved in helping the neighborhood watch programs so that the community can watch their own area and alert an officer if something strange happens.

Another way that the law enforcement of Virginia helps the community is by educating the senior citizens of the area. Our Crime Prevention Unit is very active in teaching the seniors about different crimes that target the elderly. Telephone scams and identity theft are becoming a bigger and bigger problem and senior citizens are the most likely to be hit by these crimes. By teaching

seniors to "just say no", you can greatly decrease the amount of this type of crime. These educated seniors are then better prepared to deal with a situation that could be potentially detrimental. They, in turn, can pass along safe thinking to their friends.

To build good community relationships in the law enforcement, the police officers must prove to be on hand at all times. I have seen police officers go out of their way to alert the public of a suspicious event so that the community can be prepared and ready if something were to happen. This old-fashioned policing is very important and very effective. I have seen many examples of police officers going above and beyond the call of duty to help the general public. I think that is what Virginia police officers are best at; relating to and helping the people that they are there to protect. Every time a deputy does something of that sort, they are gaining the trust of every citizen even more.

When police officers are able to work on all these levels, then they can build the best community. It is important to appeal to all ages as friendly and cooperative so that the police force can build a great deal of trust. When the police officers are able to relate on a personal level with the community, then the community is going to feel more comfortable and be able to work on a closer level with their law enforcement which directly leads to the reporting of more crimes which can lessen the crime rate. If the people in the area who are committing the crimes have been educated to begin with and then they see an active police force in the area that is working with the people constantly, the

criminals will be less likely to commit as many crimes. A combination of education and visibility will be sure to lessen the crime rate in an area.

For the past year, I have worked as an assistant in the Amherst County Sheriff's Office in Amherst, Virginia. This experience has really shown me the reason we have police and even more importantly, has greatly increased my trust in the police department. Each day that I go to work I see deputies working extremely hard and they do it all so that they can make Amherst a better place to live. Our deputies are very community oriented and are all very devoted to making Amherst County a safe and friendly place to live. I have not seen a deputy deal with a citizen in a rude or unfair way. All of our SRO's and D.A.R.E. officers love children and love helping the youth of our area. These brave and selfless people are what Virginia's Law Enforcement is made up of and because of these officers, we have a safe and pleasant environment to live in.