

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Love it or hate it, social media is here to stay. It is simultaneously a uniting and a dividing force. For many, it provides entertainment, engagement with other people, information about businesses, and an important source of community news. For others, it can increase a sense of isolation, become a source of misinformation, or provide a forum to bully or troll others. In less than 30 years, social media has emerged, adapted, grown, and transformed communication here in Orange County and around the globe.

As I recently reflected on the prior year, I scrolled back through more than 330 posts on the Orange County Sheriff's Office's Facebook page, our primary social media platform. As I did so, I marveled at the historical record such posts now provide. They bear witness to the crime and law enforcement activity in Orange County. They remind us of the useful education we can provide to residents about crime and injury prevention, road closures, threatening weather, and community events. Facebook also serves as an ideal forum to showcase the good work of our employees, celebrate their accomplishments, and mark important transitions such as swearing-in ceremonies, promotions, and retirements.

During my stroll down memory lane, I came across a June 13, 2023 post about the retirements of seven members of this office. As I often say, "The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected," and that post is proof. At the time, we were celebrating great careers and wishing beloved colleagues well. But when I saw that post again, I realized with new clarity how those retirements changed this agency and continue to affect us. We promoted several people to fill the vacated leadership spots; those individuals continue to grow into their positions while others adjust to different responsibilities. We have new personnel in every division with more opportunities on the horizon - five more people plan to retire this year.

Before I move on, let me say that contrary to what you may have heard, most law enforcement officers leave the profession at retirement, not before. Thirty years ago, a federal grant program known as "Cops Fast" hired, trained, and put thousands of new law enforcement officers on the street within a remarkably short period of time. The fact that those officers are retiring three decades later is not a surprise, and it does not represent an unusual rate of attrition.

I find myself in much the same position as a coach who is rebuilding a team after a large graduating class or the loss of personnel because of injury or movement through the transfer portal. As experienced players assume leadership roles and others move to new positions, a coach assesses incoming recruits, builds upon fundamental skills, and shapes them to the needs of the team and the realities of the schedule. Added twist for me: my team works out of two facilities - our main office and the Detention Center across town!

A mid-2023 analysis of detention center staffing conducted by the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association revealed that some detention centers in the state face large staffing shortages – as much as 60%. We are doing much better than that, but we still have quite a few open positions. We are always looking to hire the right people to help us maintain our reputation for providing highly trained supervision by compassionate detention officers within an appropriately equipped facility. It is critically important work, and severe staff shortages are known to lead to corruption, inmate behavior problems, and increased rates of assault or self-harm. I frequently tell family members of the people in our custody that their loved one is in one of the safest places on the planet, and I make sure my staff knows how critical their efforts are toward maintaining that distinction.

Some detention officers build a rewarding, challenging career in our jail, progressing through the ranks into leadership roles. Others use the position as a steppingstone to additional training and a career as a deputy. Either path provides ample opportunity for advancement, competitive pay and benefits, excellent training and support, and a desirable retirement package.

If you are hungry to feel challenged by your career, proud of your coworkers, excited about the opportunities ahead of you, and confident that your efforts are making a difference in our community, we would like to talk to you. Please call Sergeant Glenn Powell, our recruiting coordinator, at (919) 245-2908. I'm actively rebuilding my team and looking to add talent to the depth chart.