

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Law enforcement, widely considered an honorable, respected career, is one of the few professions accessible to those with or without college degrees. Bonus: it boasts interesting work, supportive colleagues, a path for career advancement, ample overtime opportunities, and a stable retirement plan.

The pre-employment process requires commitment and organization. A candidate must be a United States citizen, at least 21 years old, who possesses a high school diploma (or GED) and a driver's license. Additionally, the person must be in good physical and psychological health and pass a background check and a polygraph.

Once hired, new employees usually work in the detention center providing for the safety and well-being of those in our custody while learning more about our office. They then attend the five-week Detention Officer Certification Course, sanctioned by the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission.

After employees earn certification, they return to the Detention Center and resume their important responsibilities there. Eventually, those who perform well and are interested can request to attend Basic Law Enforcement Training - a physically and academically rigorous 20-week program containing 36 separate blocks of instruction. Cadets must then pass the state exam to become certified law enforcement officers.

But wait - there's more! New deputies enter a comprehensive, four-phase field training program, designed to acclimate them to the culture of our agency, translate classroom knowledge into real-world competence, and equip them with the experiences and relationships necessary for success. During the initial orientation phase, the new deputy works at the front desk, explores divisions within the office, and visits the telecommunications center.

In Phase 2, the trainee enters the world of patrol, beginning with a 12-hour ride-along shift with his or her Field Training Officer (FTO). The new deputy observes the work, and orients to the different in-car systems, such as the radio, emergency equipment, cameras, and computer programs. As early as the second day, the trainee starts driving, talking on the radio, and responding to calls under the FTO's supervision. Phase 2 lasts a minimum of four weeks, which is 168 work hours, and focuses on the basics, such as interacting with people, writing reports, responding to alarms, and learning policy, procedure, county ordinances, and general statutes. During Phase 2, the novice also acclimates to the physical and emotional stresses of the role, which can only be understood through experience.

In Phase 3, a secondary FTO takes over, exposing the newcomer to a different supervisory style. The two-trainee system helps avoid blind spots or favoritism, and it serves as an effective check and

balance. During this phase, as the deputy becomes increasingly independent, the FTO starts stepping back and observing more.

At least once during each phase of the program, the shift supervisor accompanies the trainee to get a feel for this new squad member. Often, we see that the academic stars of BLET struggle with the social aspects of the job and find it difficult to be effective in chaotic situations. Likewise, those with an abundance of personality and charisma sometimes need help mastering the more technical and procedural aspects of their responsibilities. The supervisor adjusts the length of field training based on what he or she discovers about the individual's style and needs.

Trainees must demonstrate competence with a set of 50 specific skills, including mastering radio protocols, executing search warrants, effecting an arrest, processing evidence, responding to residential alarms, and navigating domestic conflicts. They must also conduct traffic stops (including DWIs); investigate an unattended death; and work a missing person case. For experiences the new officer does not encounter – perhaps a bank robbery – he or she must verbally review procedures, concerns, risks, governing law, and other relevant factors with his or her FTO.

In the final phase of the program, the new deputy returns to his or her original FTO, who now wears plain clothes and allows the trainee to handle calls unassisted. Functioning as a shadow, the FTO only steps in if necessary. It takes experience and good judgement to allow someone to make the mistakes that provide learning opportunities, but not the ones that will cause a safety issue or a negative impact on the office. Successful completion of field training is not a given, although the entire process can be lengthened if a deputy needs a little extra time to master the nuances of the role.

Although training eventually ends, the mentoring relationship between a new deputy and his or her FTO rarely does. A successful career requires far more than an individual's personal performance. It takes the investment and dedication of experienced co-workers who form an ever-lengthening bridge between the past and the future of the law enforcement profession.

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