

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

November 30, 2022

Earlier this month, voters elected me to serve a third term as Sheriff of Orange County. I appreciate their renewed support. Next week, my staff and I take our oath of office for the following four years. We will continue working toward a future where everyone is secure and able to move freely about as they live, work, raise their families, and age in place with dignity and support.

Looking back, I can see that our priorities at the beginning of the last term shaped our accomplishments. I can also see the impact of two events we did not anticipate: a global pandemic and the killing of George Floyd. COVID-19 impacted every aspect of life, and Floyd's murder highlighted the pervasive nature of racism. Both altered our work. We created flexible and virtual ways to provide services, drastically reduced the population in our detention center, and examined our policies and practices in collaboration with the local NAACP chapters. The Orange County Sheriff's Office will continue to provide responsive, accountable, and professional law enforcement in spite of difficult challenges.

One of our priorities four years ago was to develop leadership for the future. Toward this end, we flipped the organizational chart. It now reflects my belief that those with the most public contact (those serving in the detention center, courts, crisis unit, community outreach division, on patrol, in the schools, as investigators, and at the front desk) are the most important faces of this agency, and they belong at the top. Therefore, my command staff and I are at the bottom, reminding us we support their efforts. We also grouped personnel into four divisions headed by majors, providing new leadership opportunities.

Another goal was to implement a body-worn camera program. I am happy to report that despite concerns about cost, storage, battery life, and possible impact on morale, we established this program, and it vastly exceeded our expectations. The cameras preserve visual and audio details of interactions from the deputy's point of view. There are many advantages. For example, investigators can see exactly what the responding deputy saw. The recordings help to assist supervisors when reviewing complaints, and our field trainers use them to gain insight into new employee performance.

Four years ago, we promised to strengthen communications with the public, and we have made tremendous progress toward this goal. We hired a public information officer who writes press releases and serves as a liaison to members of the media. We also revamped our website; developed a phone app; started this monthly column; expanded our use of social media; produced multiple videos; created and organized an image library; and improved our crisis-communication efforts.

One of my favorite initiatives has been the growth of our Citizens' Academy and volunteer program. The Academy provides an in-depth look into our office, examining the roles, responsibilities, equipment, techniques, and facilities of each division. Through guest speakers, field trips, and experiential learning, we teach participants about the breadth of our services, and we explore the often

complicated and nuanced ways our work intersects with other systems, agencies, and departments. Graduates qualify to become volunteers with our office, either in the Sheriff's Office Community Organization or in the VISION (Volunteers in Service in Our Neighborhoods) program.

With the help of the County Manager and the Board of Commissioners, we designed, built, and opened a modern detention facility to replace our 97-year-old jail. The 48,900-square-foot facility is less crowded and has improved safety and security systems. It also features a properly equipped kitchen, better medical facilities, nicer visitation areas, and a breakroom for employees. Two workrooms within the secure part of the facility allow those confined in the facility to receive education and specialized programming to help them eventually make a successful transition back into the community.

I also want to highlight an innovative outreach tool we debuted mid-term. I commissioned a public opinion poll to solicit insight about the priorities and interests of a cross-sectional sampling of Orange County. This poll identified voters' desires, helped me make decisions regarding service priorities, and provided data to support those choices. Nothing in the poll, however, affects how we respond to violent crime and carry out our constitutionally prescribed duties. This exercise was so valuable that we intend to repeat the poll during the upcoming term to ensure our delivery of discretionary services remains aligned with the interests of those we serve.

I am excited for my third term. Thank you again for your support!