

## THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Recently, several news reporters have inquired about our profession, our staffing levels, and whether we are finding it difficult to hire and retain deputies. Let me give you *The Lowdown* on these important and interconnected issues.

I often hear about local agencies operating with severe personnel shortages. In contrast, my office is well-staffed. We only have two open positions for deputy sheriffs. We have not needed to post openings or actively seek candidates; however, we are constantly looking for the best and the brightest. My team is aware that we are all passively recruiting every day through our actions, our social media, our web page, our phone app, our videos, and our presence at community events. Often people end up applying here after asking a deputy about his or her job. Still more apply when I or a member of my command staff notices someone in the community with strong interpersonal skills or a good work ethic and we inquire, “Have you ever thought about working in law enforcement?”

Since August of 2020, we have hired six experienced officers who came to us from other agencies. Meanwhile, we gained six new deputies in June following their recent graduation from our Basic Law Enforcement Training Academy. It is nice to have a mix of veteran and new deputies. One group brings experience and an understanding of what it really means to be a sworn public safety officer; the other brings new energy and an eagerness to learn to protect and serve “our way.”

There has been plenty of media coverage about bad police officers and the “hardship” of increased public scrutiny under which public safety professionals currently work. I encourage my employees to adopt a different mindset. I think this is a fabulous time to begin a public service career. This job is complicated and difficult, and there are many people who see the uniform and make incorrect judgements about the content of the wearer’s character. We can’t do anything about either of those facts. However, we can dedicate ourselves to doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason. When that is the goal, the job is in many ways a simple one, and it is an extremely rewarding one. We recognize the golden opportunity we have to exceed expectations every day, and to change incorrect judgements into positive opinions.

There are also practical matters which make serving the community as a deputy an inviting prospect. Law enforcement is a professional career. Although a college education is beneficial, it is not required. Once hired and trained, there is room for an individual to explore his or her interests and move into a more specialized role. For example, some of our deputies are K-9 handlers; others are drone operators, evidence technicians, members of our motorcycle unit, and crime scene investigators. Deputies receive a competitive benefits package, a career ladder, and a pension plan.

Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to sell law enforcement as all rainbows and roses. It is not. Deputies face repeated exposure to critical incidents. Responding to death scenes, domestic calls, car crashes, and violent crimes requires one to suppress personal feelings in order to carry out the responsibilities of the job. Encountering the unpredictable behavior of mentally ill individuals or people impaired by substances is difficult. Serving during a time when people doubt your ethics, your integrity, and your motivation can be draining. All of these things are difficult to share with loved ones, in part because we don't want to expose them, even second hand, to the darker underbelly of community life. Therefore, my command staff and I work hard to provide support and resources to help our people cope with these challenges.

My life's work is in a valuable profession, one with job-security and the incredible opportunity to make a difference. One of our new deputies talks about looking forward to the tiny moments – the near daily opportunity to help, direct, comfort, reassure, counsel, or support during both routine encounters and difficult times. Even when we write a citation or arrest someone, and the interaction is not pleasant, we know our work is making other people safer.

There's an old adage that everyone is selling something. I certainly am. I sell community confidence and safety, and I'm always looking for people to help me do it.