

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Last month, I wrote about the benefits and difficulties of a public safety career. My life's work is in a valuable profession, one with job-security and the incredible opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. In this month's edition of *The Lowdown*, I am going to address the initial training necessary to begin such a career.

As sheriff, I am responsible for enforcing laws, investigating crimes, providing for security of county courthouses, serving civil process paperwork, and the overall safety of Orange County. Additionally, I am responsible for the operation of the county detention facility, more commonly known as the jail.

Deputies help me carry out the former functions and detention officers provide for the safety and well-being of those in my custody. Each role requires a specialized training program. Detention officers complete a five-week program, Basic Detention Officer Training (BDOT), while deputies receive their certification upon the successful completion of a 20-week Basic Law Enforcement Training class commonly called BLET. The North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission is responsible for both certifications.

I hire deputies with experience serving in other agencies as well as people brand new to law enforcement. New, uncertified hires initially serve in the detention center. Within a year, they are required to attend and successfully complete BDOT where they receive twenty-two separate blocks of instruction, including crisis intervention, preventing and responding to facility emergencies, conflict resolution, and the management and supervision of offenders. Once certified, they return to work in the detention center. After a year or so, an interested detention officer can ask to be considered for BLET, or they may continue to serve in the jail.

Shortly after I became Sheriff, we started our own BLET academy. We felt it best for our community if cadets received training from people who understood the dynamics and needs of our region, and we knew we had talented instructors. Together with Durham Technical Community College, we created an academy pitched to a philosophical sweet spot. An overly militaristic program would not be conducive to our brand of friendly, trustworthy, and approachable service, but we still wanted to create a program with a standard of unwavering excellence. After seven years, our academy enjoys an excellent reputation; we recently began teaching our eighth class of cadets. These cadets face a rigorous program of academic work, practical skill building, and physical fitness training.

I generally welcome the cadets early in the program; they don't see me again until the school director and the training coordinator tell me, "We have our class." By this, they mean the students who are unable to handle the rigor have washed out, and those capable of completing the course have gelled as a unit. At this point, I return to campus and present them with the class football, which is the outward symbol of my faith in them. The class leader protects the football for the rest of the course and returns it to me at the graduation ceremony. The football I will soon present to Class 8 is as pristine as it was on the day I gave it to Class 1.

In addition to training cadets who will work for the Orange County Sheriff's Office, we enroll students from neighboring jurisdictions. The current class has students from my office, Person County Sheriff's Office, Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and Duke University Police Departments. Each class has a motto, and each maintains a memory wall. On the wall, members paste a short tribute to every law enforcement officer who dies in the United States performing his or her duties during the duration of the class. This is always a very sobering list, but a powerful reminder of the importance of service and the willingness to sacrifice.

Many cadets are employed by an agency during their time in the academy, as is the case when my detention officers seek to become deputies. Others come to the academy on their own time, but under the sponsorship of an agency. A sponsoring agency conducts the background check and certifies the student meets all requirements. Although sponsored students have tuition waivers for program costs (approximately \$2,400.00 for an in-state student), they must buy their own books and uniforms, and there is no promise of employment. Our academy, however, enjoys a reputation for graduating law enforcement professionals dedicated to doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason; graduating cadets generally have no trouble finding a position in our area.

If you think you might be interested in a rewarding career, please come see me. I'd love to tell you more about how you can get started.