



COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE and TRUST in LAW ENFORCEMENT
Tuesday, June 9, 2020

Many have voiced concerns about law enforcement misconduct. Policing is primarily a local responsibility. With over 18,000 agencies and 800,000 officers nationwide differences may exist in regards to integrity and how people are treated. Our community consistently demands and values a law enforcement culture that reflects professionalism, integrity and accountability. It is hoped that the horrific crime committed by an officer in another state and the apparent criminal acquiescence by others are not attributed to our local officers who do not tolerate brutality or other egregious actions.

An organization is only as good as the people that serve in it. The Sheriff's Office only hires people who are capable of contributing to its values of excellence, integrity and teamwork. Candidates complete a battery of tests and are subject to exhaustive background/security/polygraph inquiries. Extensive psychological examinations help weed out those not suited for police work.

Initial and annual re-training curriculum for deputies focuses on developing decision-making and critical thinking skills and emphasizes constitutional law, fair and impartial policing, de-escalation of force, and protecting the vulnerable. The 2015 Presidential Task Force on 21st Century Policing lauded Washington's system as a "national blueprint for law enforcement training." Deputies are also trained in and equipped with a wide-array of non-lethal force options.

Policy creates the foundation for law enforcement operations. The Sheriff's Office continually reviews its policies and retains an outside firm to ensure these policies are based on ever evolving standards, best practices and state/federal laws that emphasize the preservation of life. To improve transparency we are working to make all policies available on-line.

For decades, government downsized the availability of treatment for those suffering from behavioral health issues. By default, law enforcement is called upon to intervene in manifestations of mental illness. All deputies are trained in crisis intervention. Specialized mental health deputies respond to the most complicated, repetitive and potentially dangerous cases. The Sheriff's Office works with the community to establish a crisis stabilization center to provide options for recovery and reduce the involvement of mentally ill people in the criminal justice system.

While a SWAT Team responds to the most serious threats, a specialized Crisis Negotiation Team deploys in tandem and has a record of peaceably resolving most situations. A Special Event Team ensures the right of assembly while preserving peace and safety.

Infusing community-policing practices into its operations, the Sheriff's Office strives to maintain positive and helpful relations with people. It pioneered "Resident Deputy," "Neighborhood Deputy," and "Criminal Interdiction Team." These programs involve residents and deputies working together to solve community and safety challenges. An expert assists in developing relationships, building trust and increasing service to traditionally under-served communities.

Jail space is scarce, expensive and not needed in all circumstances. Deputies may, where safe, appropriate and legal, consider issuing criminal citations or request a summons in lieu of arrest. Substance abuse treatment is available for incarcerated people.

The Sheriff's Office has long-standing practices requiring a review of all responses to force. Its policies for the investigation of deadly force require an "outside investigation," and a review by the Medical Examiner and Prosecuting Attorney with civilian oversight. Many of these requirements are now embodied in state law.

The command staff of the Sheriff's Office provides quality leadership. While we strive for excellence, suggestions for improvement are always welcome and complaints about service are taken seriously, investigated and properly adjudicated.

To ensure the "best evidence," protect deputies and increase accountability and transparency, the Sheriff's Office received budgetary authority to implement a body worn camera program by next year.

I'm extremely proud of the men and women who serve at your Whatcom County Sheriff's Office and of all law enforcement in Whatcom County. They are kind, professional and care about people. From displaying compassion when investigating incidents of domestic violence and the sexual abuse of children; to performing search and rescue operations; to after nearly being killed by an assailant's gunfire, working feverishly to save the suspect's life, they have built a culture of excellence and dependability.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Bill Elfo'.

Bill Elfo, Sheriff