

Memorandum

3/24/21

Winooski Police Department

Rick Hebert, Chief of Police

Jason Ziter, School Resource Officer

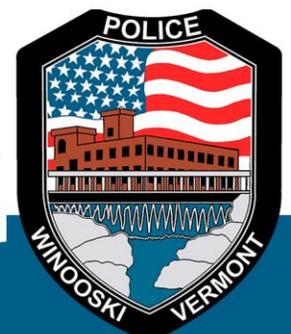
To: Winooski School Board Trustees Dear Trustees,

This memo will define and analyze the historical role of the Winooski Police Department's School Resource Officer (SRO) position within the Winooski School District and the Winooski community focusing from 2015-2020. This review will include a list and description of roles and responsibilities of the SRO, a statistical analysis of the number and types of activities the SRO has performed, as well as various other factors that influence both the role and activities of the position.

The Winooski Police Department has had a police officer in the school system since 1999. The position was originally funded by a grant from the Department of Education. The primary responsibilities of this position per the MOU are twofold; one is school safety, to include enforcing state/local statute, identifying safety concerns and assisting in safety drills. The SRO is expected to work with the VT Department of Children and Families (DCF) when assistance is required for any child in need of supervision (CHINS) investigation in the WSD. The SRO is expected to work with the WSD administration, Winooski Restorative Justice Panel and the Chittenden County State's Attorney's Office to determine the best course of action for any violations of statute.

The other primary responsibility of the SRO is to build relationships in the community by "encouraging positive interaction between the youth of Winooski and the police department. The SRO serves as the department's liaison with the schools, promoting alternative and healthy activities for the youth of Winooski. The School Resource Officer will make frequent contact with various individuals in the general public, community organizations, as well as other law enforcement and state agencies."

With a large population of refugees from all over the world, Winooski is the most racially diverse community in the state of Vermont. Over 50% of students are of color, while 42% are English Language Learners (ELL). One of the most significant challenges faced by the Winooski community is economic hardship. A review of available statistics for 2014-2018 from the US Census Bureau indicated the median family household income in Winooski is \$49,663, as opposed to the state median of \$60,076. The percentage of persons living in poverty in Winooski is 31%, as opposed to a statewide average of 11%. According to the WSD, over 70% of Winooski Students qualify for free school lunch. In addition to economic factors, members of the Winooski community face a number of other significant challenges. A review of the Valcour records database used by the Winooski Police Department, from June 2015 through June 2020, showed that Winooski has the highest per capita rate for domestic violence arrests and drug overdoses in Chittenden County. With the exception of the City of Burlington, Winooski has the highest per capita rate of calls for mental health issues and intoxication complaints. These factors, combined with a lack of economic opportunity, can result in various degrees of trauma to children, which often manifests itself in challenging behaviors at school.



The mission of the Winooski Police Department is to provide the community and visitors with the highest quality of law enforcement services. Under the vision, values and goals of the department mission statement, the WPD aspires "to be a leader in policing, a model for character, innovation, and service. We strive to protect our diverse and dynamic community with fairness, integrity, and respect for the rights of the individual. We resolve to develop a creative, forward-thinking workforce, dedicated to raising our level of excellence to meet the challenges of tomorrow."

In 2014, Rick Hebert was appointed Chief of Police for the City of Winooski. In that same year, Chief Hebert and Sean McMannon, Superintendent for the WSD, evaluated the SRO program and determined that it was not meeting the needs of the school district or the police department. In meetings with both Chief Hebert and Superintendent McMannon, it was emphasized that school safety and building a strong relationship with the school community would be paramount and have equal priority. Superintendent McMannon also stressed that he wanted the SRO program to model the National Association of School Resource Officer (NASRO) Triad. This concept emphasizes that the SRO has the equal responsibilities of being an educator and informal counselor, as well as a law enforcement officer. Since 2015, clear communication and program assessment between the SRO, police leadership and all levels of school district administration has been a hallmark of this program. It has led to regular assessment and evolution of best practices in school safety for both the SRO position and the school district, as well as creating additional opportunities for building police-community relationships.

This memo will also show that since 2015, in addition to the WSD, the SRO program has worked extensively with a wide variety of organizations to meet the needs of the school community. This includes Centerpoint, the Chittenden County State's Attorney's Office (SAO), the VT Department for Children and Families (DCF), First Call, Howard Human Services and the Winooski Restorative Justice Panel (WRJP).

In 2016, the WPD hosted a bias training for law enforcement. In 2017, the WPD hosted another law enforcement training that taught de-escalation tactics. WPD officers received further bias training in 2018 through a city sponsored class and several supervisors attended a fourth bias training in 2019 in Boston. In 2019, three WPD officers were certified as Instructors in ICAT (Integrating Communication Assessment and Tactics) de-escalation tactics. In 2020, the whole department was given this training.

During the 2015-2016 school year, there were a total of 49 WRJP referrals or court citations issued. That number declined by 43% to 28 in the 2016-2017 school year, followed by a 25% decline to 21 in 2017-2018. This declined 71% to 6 in the 2018-2019 school year and then to 2 during the 2019-2020 school year.

During the 2016-2017 school year the call volume and arrestable offenses dropped precipitously from the previous year. Total calls for services dropped to 331 for the entire district. Disturbances at JFK dropped from 96 to 63 and WRJP referrals and citations issued at the middle school and high school dropped from 33 to 19. While violent crimes were also down in the middle and high school, there were still 15 citations or referrals issued for those types of offenses; 7 for disorderly conduct, 7 for simple assault and 1 for simple assault on a police officer. JFK and the middle school put a renewed focus on truancy, with 15 incidents documented (as opposed to 0 the year before). It was determined that in truancy cases involving youth aged 11-15, they would first be referred to Centerpoint, a youth program in South Burlington, who also has a counselor available in the WSD. If not successful at Centerpoint, the child's case would be referred to family court. For cases involving children at JFK, a report would be made to DCF, who would determine next steps. If the child's attendance situation did not improve, the family would be referred to family court.

Due to experience with these children and families, the SRO program worked closely with Centerpoint counselors, DCF workers and the state's attorney for juvenile cases to provide information and help determine the best course of action for truancy cases.

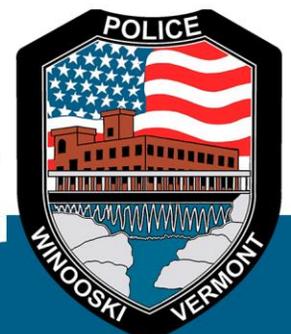


The 2017-2018 school year was a significant year for the SRO program, as it was able to take a far more proactive role in regards to the NASRO Triad of education and mentoring. Calls for service continued to drop, which in turn created more opportunities for community engagement. While call volume dropped to 262, calls for community outreach, public speaking, special events and SRO education increased to 70 and now constituted 27% of all calls for service. Response calls for disturbances at JFK dropped 78%, from 63 to 14. Cases of violence in the high school and middle school dropped 60%, with a total of 6 citations or referrals for disorderly conduct, simple assault and aggravated assault (3, 2, 1). After February, there were only two violations of statute that required a referral or citation. Truancy calls across the district were similar to the year before, with a total of 14 cases. At JFK, the SSR staff received training in PBIS (positive behavioral intervention support) response. Throughout the district, more training was being provided in regards to the effects of trauma on learning and brain development. This training was hosted by Dave Melnick, Clinical Director at Northeastern Family Institute.

During the 2018-2019 school year calls for service declined to 242, with 51 (21%) of those for proactive work (community events, SRO or DARE education, public speaking, special events). Disturbances were up 50% at JFK, from 14 to 21, but otherwise, all other metrics used for documenting disruptions were down. Referrals and court citations were down 71%, from 21 to 6. Two were issued to juveniles (disorderly conduct and arson) and four citations issued to adults who committed crimes against children or on school property (2 for domestic assault, 1 for DUI with a child in the vehicle, one for driving with a suspended license). Truancy cases dropped from 14 to 9. All school staff, as well as the SRO, received additional training in trauma informed education. In January of 2019, the SRO program hosted a training in Winooski for law enforcement and school personnel from around the state titled "Understanding Children with Trauma". The SRO program began utilizing the Howard Human Services Community Outreach Program to assist with children and families in crisis at the WSD. This is a new program, shared by multiple communities, to assist law enforcement with persons having issues with a wide variety of issues to include mental health, homelessness and substance abuse. Officer Ziter was also trained and certified to teach the revamped DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) curriculum. Using this training, a DARE K-2 and 5th grade program was initiated at JFK. In the summer, the SRO program hosted a public safety summer camp that was attended by approximately 15 students. The camp showed the attendees various aspects of the police, firefighting and rescue professions.

During the 2019-2020 school year Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the WSD was closed in mid-March and did not re-open. There were a total of 195 incidents for the school year itself, although 42 of those were for directed patrols conducted after hours, on school grounds, by other officers. Of the remaining 153 incidents, 44 (29%) fell under proactive work. There were only 10 documented disturbances across the entire WSD, and no reported assaults or disorderly conduct cases. There were only two citations issued during this year, both adults (lewd and lascivious conduct against a student and violation of an abuse prevention order against a teacher). There were no documented violations of statutes by juveniles. Given the abbreviated school year, no truancy cases were opened. The SRO assisted with traffic control and handing out meals at pick up sites and hosted video classes to stay connected to students during the pandemic.

Over the last 5 years, the SRO program and the WSD have made huge strides in both school safety and building strong community relationships. Through close collaboration and a willingness to make changes, best practices have been constantly evaluated and changed when appropriate. In 2015, community trauma was manifesting itself in disruptive ways by both parents and children across the entire district. The incidence of violence and disruption was troubling, far too frequent, and distracting from the school's mission to educate its students.



Due to necessity, response by both the SRO and WSD was primarily reactive on most occasions, although the SRO program was able to engage in a number of activities to build relationships within the community. Even within that school year, and every year after, both the WSD and the SRO program identified steps, training and resources that reduced the level of disruption, making the school environment safer and providing higher levels of care and support. As the school environment became calmer, this created more opportunity for the SRO program to not only spend time engaging with the community, but improve the quality of the programming it offers to the community.

The SRO also plays a crucial role as a liaison between the school district and the officers of the WPD. The SRO frequently shares relevant data with other members of the WPD in regards to children and families whose issues and concerns at school may bleed over into the community. Conversely, the SRO is often a conduit for patrol officers passing on information to school staff about significant issues that occurred out of school. This liaison role is crucial to identifying areas of need for students and providing appropriate resources to support them.

The SRO is a sworn police officer for the City of Winooski and is equipped and trained with the tools that are used to protect the community and themselves in emergencies, not to elicit fear or intimidation. The Winooski Police Department has heard various concerns and is now using an unmarked police car on school campus and the SRO is wearing a soft uniform. The SRO at times may be called to assist patrol officers in the event of dynamic calls for service and needs to have the necessary equipment immediately available to respond to these events both on campus and within the city.

In closing, the residents of Winooski face a number of challenges in regards to poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health issues. These issues occur in both the school district and the wider community, frequently overlapping. The role of the SRO is crucial in supporting the greater community by building relationships, being a liaison between organizations and creating a safe environment, both in and out of school. The Winooski Police Department is dedicated to Public Safety and the crucial work of anti-racism and partnering with WSA and other marginalized groups to address concerns of the role of the SRO, and strengthening the relationships within the school district and the community as a whole. We will continue to evolve and support new alternative paths to positive outcomes, to best support and protect all families in Winooski.

