

Destination Zero: Officer Traffic Safety Award Submission

Herndon Police Department (VA)



AGENCY OVERVIEW

The Town of Herndon is the third largest incorporated town in Virginia, comprised of 4.25 square miles. It is situated in western Fairfax County, just minutes from Dulles International Airport and approximately 25 miles from Washington, DC. The town has 11 parks, and the W&OD bike trail runs through its downtown. It has a current residential population of around 24,500. Its citizens are well educated, with 48.5% having a college degree, and the median income level is approximately \$100,000. The town also has a growing Hispanic population of approximately 36%. The town is surrounded by a growing business base due to its location and has become a hub for information technology, government facilities, and other national and international businesses. The leadership of the town preserves the unique sense of community of Herndon and strives to maintain the balance between business growth and small-town charm, especially with construction activity preparing the way for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority subway stop later this year.

Historically, the first law enforcement office in the town was formed in 1879, with an appointed town sergeant. In 1958, the responsibilities of a town sergeant were turned over to a chief of police. Under a chief of police, the department was comprised of both full and part-time officers. By 1972, the department had six officers. From 1972-1983, the six-man department grew to 26 officers and 10 civilian personnel. Also, in 1972, the first dispatcher was hired for a part-time call center, and was later expanded to a 24-hour, seven day a week operation in 1975.

Today the agency is a professional, progressive mid-size police department employing 54 police officers and 18 civilian personnel. It is nationally accredited through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, Inc. (CALEA) and has led the region in policies and practices for the past 10 years under the current chief, who came to Herndon after retiring from a neighboring county agency in 2012. The department serves a very diverse and supportive community and places a priority on community policing and engagement, a practice that is supported throughout all levels of the organization. It values the trusting relationship it has earned with the Herndon community and has accumulated a total of 12,500 followers on its social media platforms (with a town population of 24,500).

Message From the Chief



Over the past 9 years, the Herndon Police Department has made significant strides in developing a culture of safety, emphasizing smart risk-taking and sound decision making through education, discussion, training, and accountability. Changing a culture takes time and patience, a desire of staff to engage in continuous learning, and a recognition of the need to change how we operate. Officers and supervisors need to be provided encouragement and support for decisions that minimize risk in the accomplishment of the public safety mission, and to make mistakes within safe boundaries to enhance the learning process.

Creating a culture of safety within law enforcement requires a change in mindset, a progressive approach to examine ways to safely solve the tactical and operational challenges we face daily. This means abandoning old ways of doing business, and an openness to new methods and tactics that challenge our traditional approach to problem solving, all with the goal of reducing accidents, injuries, and exposures to work-related traumatic incidents.

As the chief in the Town of Herndon and throughout my professional career, I have continually placed a priority on law enforcement safety. This attention to safety began during my early career with the Fairfax County Police Department where I initiated, developed, and commanded the first comprehensive Law Enforcement Safety Officer Program in the country. After being appointed chief in Herndon, I returned to school to earn my master's degree and completed my thesis on organizational safety (*"A Systems Approach to Law Enforcement Safety: Recommendation for a Comprehensive Safety Management Framework"*). I have worked diligently on various board positions with the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police (VACP) to educate both officers and executive leaders towards a mindset of safety. This is illustrated in a class that I developed entitled *"Building Organizational Safety"* that was taught in Herndon and for the VACP First Line Supervisors Course. I have partnered with the U.S. Marshal's Service to facilitate a National Public Safety Wellness Survey and educated others about the mental health challenges facing our profession. Currently I am working with a non-profit organization out of Reno, Nevada to build the first National Public Safety Wellness Center in Northern Virginia, a no-cost, walk-in facility to treat first responders experiencing mental health challenges. This future facility is expected to serve as a



Signs of support posted on each entrance gate to the secured parking lot. Officers pass through these gates whenever they return to the station.

national model, not only for treating those in need, but for training additional mental health clinicians to work with our profession.

The process of building this award submission has provided me with far more than a platform to demonstrate the commitment our agency and leadership team has made to officer safety. It has assisted me in identifying current gaps in our efforts and programs that still need to be addressed. The pursuit of excellence in the interest of officer safety is an endless process that must continue to evolve. We must continue to evaluate where we have room to grow and improve, especially given the challenges and evolving threats facing our profession. Placing a priority on the health and safety of our officers must become the single most important job of every law enforcement leader.

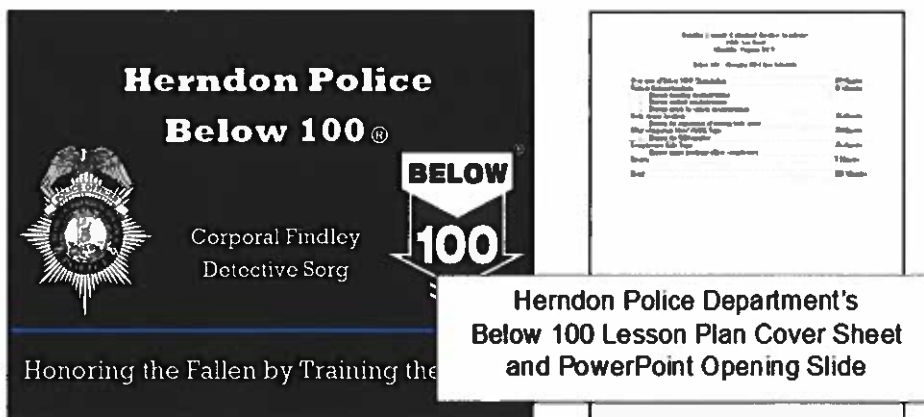
OFFICER TRAFFIC SAFETY

Training, equipment, and appropriate policy are crucial elements of officer safety in traffic operations. The department has taken great strides in keeping officer safety in the forefront and has emphasized ongoing training, improved equipment, and updated policy to promote safety through emerging safety tactics. **The department was awarded the Virginia Law Enforcement Challenge Award for three consecutive years for its efforts in traffic safety through enforcement, education, and operational initiatives**, until this competition was suspended in 2019 due to the pandemic. It received the highest award in 2019 for the Commonwealth's top award for best traffic safety program in the state. The following highlights the department's continued focus on safety in traffic operations.

Below 100 Training

The department sent two sworn members to the Below 100 training in 2018, which is a commonsense training program on safety areas under an officer's control, with particular focus on such elements as seatbelts, vests, driving tactics and proper procedures. The officers then returned and conducted training for the entire department. The two officers used the Below 100 template for the training, but also incorporated our own relevant traffic policies into the instruction.

Over the course of the past 18 months, the department has experienced significant turnover and hired both new officers straight out of the academy and certified officers from other agencies to fill vacancies. As a result, this training will be updated and repeated during the 2022 calendar year for all sworn HPD officers.



EVOC Training and Instructors

Sworn officers attend two weeks of Emergency Vehicle Operations (EVOC) training when they go through the academy. After graduation, officers are required to attend EVOC training every three years. Training is conducted at the academy track and officers drive the same vehicles they operate on duty. EVOC training involves high speed driving and decision making, pursuit operations and policy review, cone courses and accident avoidance, and inclement weather driving on a specialized skid pan to simulate icy roadway conditions.

HPD has several trained instructors who assist academy staff in conducting EVOC training for the department. These instructors also assist academy staff several times a year when conducting EVOC training for new recruits. This allows our part-time EVOC instructors to hone their teaching and driving skills in this area. One of our EVOC instructors is also tasked with providing classroom-based pursuit training annually for all sworn department members. This training covers our department policy, liability and relevant case law. Videos of police pursuits located online are often used to illustrate the dangers involved in pursuit and response driving.



Emergency Vehicle Operations (EVOC) training



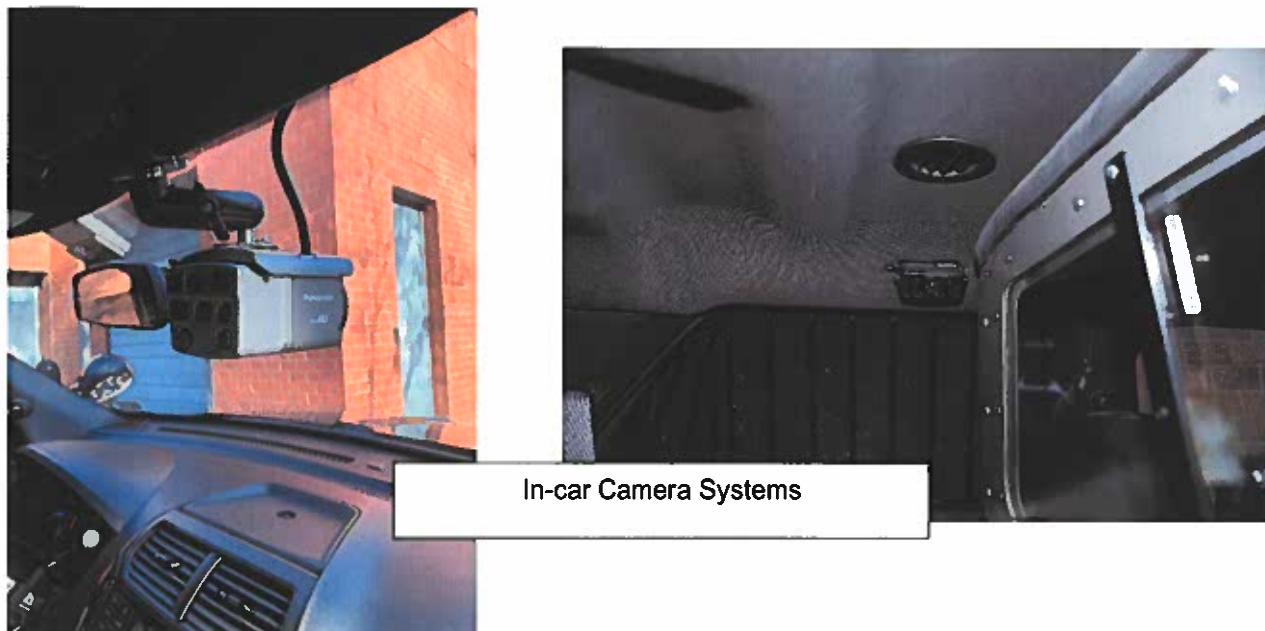
GPS in Vehicles

All police vehicles are equipped with an automatic vehicle locator (AVL) that provides real-time location and tracking management. This helps dispatchers to effectively deploy officers to calls, maximize efficiency and time, and provides a critical safety feature to assist in quickly locating an officer's vehicle when they are not responding to the radio. The new Axon body worn camera system currently being implemented in the department will provide an additional GPS tracking device to assist in quickly locating

an officer on foot and away from their vehicle. The new BWCs are expected to be issued in the next month.

In-Car Cameras

The department currently utilizes Panasonic in-car cameras but is in the process of transitioning to the Axon camera system, with built in license plate readers (LPR). In addition to the forward-facing front camera, HPD's vehicles are equipped with rear-facing cameras and back-seat cameras so officers can safely watch suspects during transport. In-car cameras automatically initiate when an officer turns on their emergency lights to ensure driving behaviors and citizen encounters are captured on video.



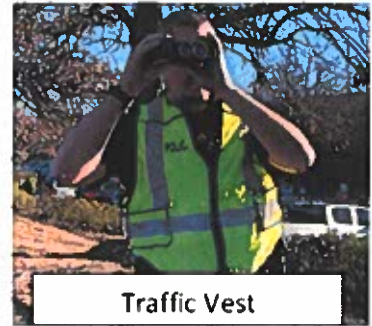
Speed Monitoring and Accountability

Dash cameras in each of the department's cruisers are set to automatically turn on when the vehicle reaches 65 mph. The main purpose of this feature is to ensure pursuits or high-speed emergency response driving is captured on both the violator and the officer. Automatic recording of vehicles traveling at high speeds also serves as an accountability measure. Although these activations are not automatically sent to supervisors, the video is subject to being randomly selected for audit. Video audits of both in-car and BWCs must be conducted monthly by all squad supervisors. If policy violations are discovered, supervisors have the option of handling them formally or informally, depending on the nature of the violation, severity of the incident, and past performance of the officer.

*All vehicle accidents are required to be formally investigated through our internal affairs process. Over the past 5 years, from 2017-2021, officers have been involved in a total of only 18 at fault vehicle accidents. **None of the 18 at-fault accidents were the result of excessive speed.** Most of these accidents involved low speeds in parking lots or while slowing or stopped on the roadway.*

High Visibility Traffic Vests

Officers are required by policy to wear their yellow, high-visibility traffic vests when working traffic assignments or while working accident scenes on the roadways.



Traffic Vest

Cruiser Selection

The department has been purchasing hybrid utility vehicles for use in patrol operations for the past several years. The hybrid utility is pursuit-rated, maintains power and performance, and comes with industry safety features and a generous passenger/cargo space when outfitted. The vehicle is engineered to meet the 75-mph rear-impact crash test and has side protection and cabin enhancement structural reinforcement to provide crash safety. Back seat cages separate the passenger area of the vehicle from equipment stored in the rear cargo area. The larger size of the utility vehicles creates a safer and more comfortable passenger area for two officers. This is especially useful when officers share a cruiser during field training. Vehicles are replaced approximately every 7 years or 100,000 miles.



Hybrid Police Cruiser



Seat Belts

Personnel are required to always wear seat belts while on duty. It is both a department policy and a state law. This applies to both town-owned vehicles and to rental cars being operated by department personnel. Signs were installed on both exit gates to the department's secured parking lot to remind officers to always buckle up and be cognizant of their speed.



Pursuits - Training on the pursuit policy is conducted annually and documented. Training consists of policy review, case law discussion, liability and/or review of video incidents of pursuits that are available for discussion and training.

All pursuits are formally investigated and documented through the department's internal affairs process. When policy violations occur, officers receive discipline in accordance with the seriousness of the violation and past performance. Remedial training is mandated in cases where it is warranted.

The department's pursuit policy was changed a few years ago to narrow the circumstances when a pursuit can be initiated, limiting pursuits to incidents involving crimes of violence or of an immediate threat to public safety. This has resulted in a significant reduction of pursuits over the past three years to from 3 in 2018 to only 1 total between 2019-2021.

Elimination of Vehicle Stop Sticks

According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 14 officers were struck and killed by other vehicles in 2020. In 2021, 28 officers died in "struck-by" events.

To reduce the chances of our officers being struck, stop sticks were recently removed from all department vehicles and eliminated as an authorized tool to stop fleeing vehicles due to the danger posed to the officer deploying them. Roadblocks and pit maneuvers are still permitted as tactics to stop fleeing vehicles if the officer has attended the specific EVOG training courses for these tactics and maintained proficiency through retraining. Officers must be retrained in these tactics every 3 years.

Traffic Accident Investigation

The department has several officers trained in traffic accident reconstruction. These officers investigate accidents resulting in serious injuries or fatalities, as well as serious cruiser accidents.

Recently, a drone was obtained on grant funding that will allow accident reconstruction to be done from the air, eliminating the need to close roadways or place officers in the roadway to conduct accident scene mapping/reconstruction and photo documentation. This program will be initiated, and training conducted for ARU investigators, once department policy on the drone program is finalized.

Conclusion

The Herndon Police Department understands the importance of placing a focused effort on supporting our officer's overall health and wellness, for personal wellness and job performance. We also understand the importance of extending these same resources to all our professional staff, who support our daily mission to provide effective public safety services to our community. Our efforts have resulted in a holistic health, safety, and wellness program that has increased the opportunities for personnel to maintain positive mental and physical health in an increasingly difficult and stressful profession, as well as enhance our ability to remain safe on the job. Our program has also contributed to better working conditions and a healthy work culture within the agency, which has been a highly valuable selling point for our recruiting team, demonstrating our department's sincere care and concern for our employees. Our overall goal is to not only keep our officers physically safe and mentally well on the job, but to ensure they leave the profession whole, with the ability to enjoy their lives in retirement after years of dedicated public service.