

2003 Amherst Police Report

The year 2003 brought more change to the Amherst Police Department. Lieutenant Patrick Doherty, best known as the Department's first D.A.R.E. officer, retired in July. His contributions in providing direction for the department, as well as his tireless work with the youth of Amherst, are greatly appreciated. Officer Mark Schofield also retired at the end of the year after over fourteen years of service in the patrol division. Officer Schofield was one of the original motorcycle officers, and his contributions to the program have led to its success. Both officers served the Town well, and we wish them the best as they pursue new challenges in second careers.

Adequate staffing continued to be a problem in 2003 due to the retirement of these two veteran officers who, combined, gave thirty-nine years of service to the Town. Law enforcement hiring and training is a lengthy process, and as the year came to a close, one new officer was completing his field training, while employment testing was underway to fill the second vacancy. In addition to the retirements, the Department continued to be short one officer who is recovering from medical issues following his military activation in 2002. His return is eagerly anticipated in early 2004.

In comparing 2003 to 2002 statistically, some of the categories that were influenced by self-initiated officer activity rebounded, in part due to improving staffing levels. These categories included the total amount of traffic enforcement and the total number of reports. Unfortunately, these improving numbers were not enough to prevent increasing numbers in several other areas that do not bode well for the Town. Despite a modest increase in our traffic violation enforcement, the Department logged the highest number of traffic accidents on record. In addition the number of complaints from citizens concerning improper operation of motor vehicles increased by thirty-seven percent. These numbers are not acceptable and indicate more effort must be expended to make Amherst roadways safer. In other non-motor vehicle related categories, the total number of reported crimes increased by twenty-one percent, and more serious crimes such as armed robbery occurred. The total number of business and residential burglaries also increased substantially from 2002, though the total is still a very low number for the size of our community. Overall, Amherst continues to be a very safe place to live, with the vast majority of crimes being property crimes versus crimes against a person. However, all crime has an effect on the quality of life in a community, and the Amherst Police Department remains committed to reducing criminal activity, by utilizing an active, visible patrol force, and diligently investigating all crimes to increase our rate of apprehension.

The Department successfully instituted two long anticipated programs this year. Our speed display trailer was received earlier this year and it has already been utilized in nineteen different locations in town. It is typically located on a particular street for several days in an effort to educate motorists as to their speed. Residents have enthusiastically received it wherever the trailer has been deployed. Though it is too early to statistically measure its success, many citizens are commenting they have noticed a decline in residential speeding while the trailer is in place, and even a residual effect after the trailer has been moved. The trailer purchase was primarily funded by a federal grant and local donations.

The second new program instituted was the School Resource Officer at the Amherst Middle School. Though approved for the past school year, the staffing issues caused a one-year delay in implementing what was felt was a critically needed component in our community policing effort. In the short time this program has been in place, it appears to be an outstanding success in many ways. The collaboration between school and department has been very positive, and it is believed the program has already played an integral part in facilitating the educational experience by improving the school environment. The Department and school officials continue to be very excited about what this program can accomplish as it develops a unique approach to the needs of Amherst. This program was also funded creatively, with the majority of the position paid with a federal grant.

The Department has proposed an additional officer in the upcoming budget. This position, to be funded commencing in September to lessen the fiscal impact, will be assigned to the detective unit as an additional investigator. This additional

position would allow the Department to address areas which need to be refined in order to be proactive, and to keep up with the changes in Town and the surrounding area. These areas include the need to devote much more time to crime prevention efforts. For years the Department devoted manpower to crime prevention programs for both residents and business owners in an effort to reduce the opportunity for crime to occur. Dovetailed into a strong patrol presence, these programs can be very successful in maintaining a low crime rate over a long period of time. As the workload of the Department has increased, the ability to dedicate hours to these programs has suffered.

A second area identified as requiring improvement relates to specialized investigations, particularly drug investigations. Over fifteen years ago, the Department operated with two detective positions, as well as an officer assigned on a part-time basis to serve as a prosecutor in district court. Today, the prosecutor function is incorporated into the same two detective positions. In addition, the commercial growth within the Town, as well as the opening of the high school, has caused substantial increases in the workload of the detectives. Specialized investigations are very labor intensive, even in their early stages of development. Although the Department has conducted several drug investigations in the past few years, their success has been lessened by a lack of manpower.

The third area the department needs to address is accreditation. Accreditation can be accomplished on both a state and a national level, and typically it begins at the state level and transitions to the national level over several years. This was an area originally identified as a Department goal nearly ten years ago, but because it is a man-hour intensive project, it has been barely touched during those years.

The final area the Department seeks to address is the further involvement of senior staff members in the administration of the agency. It is critical for the long-term success of the Department to develop key personnel to be in a position to assume command of the agency when the time presents itself.

To maintain a safe community there must be collaboration between the police department and the citizens. Without the eyes and ears of the community to assist the police department, the quality of life erodes as crime and safety issues increase. The Department strongly encourages citizens to report suspicious or unsafe activity as it occurs, and to take ownership in the type of community you want to live in. In an effort to seek new or better ways to provide a high level of police service to the Town of Amherst, all comments, ideas, and suggestions are always welcome. Please call, write, e-mail, or stop by with your thoughts. In addition, we invite you to visit our website at www.amherstpolice.com to learn more about your police department, and to subscribe to our e-mail police log. It is a good way to stay in touch with what is happening in this community.

Once again this year, the police department wishes to thank the other town departments, particularly Fire, EMS, and DPW, for all their assistance during the year. The Town has been very fortunate to develop a cohesive team that works well together to deliver a high level of service, and to provide well for the safety of all in town. The Department would also like to express appreciation for the support, shown in so many ways, the community has given to the police department. We look forward to continuing to provide the best service possible at the least impact to the taxpayer over the coming year.