



Lake Wales Police Department

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Memorandum

To: James Slaton, City Manager
From: Chris Velasquez, Chief of Police *CV*
CC: File
Date: September 15, 2020
Ref: Department Activity

COVID-19 has presented significant challenges to law enforcement in Lake Wales and across the country. A majority of our job involves direct personal contact with the public but social distancing requirements along with the use of personal protective equipment has directly affected our outreach efforts. Although challenging, we continue working to build new relationships while building upon current positive relationships throughout the city.

1. In response to incidents that have occurred in other states throughout our nation, the department has reviewed and modified our General Orders related to the use of protective action by our members.
- The use of “choke holds” was and continues to be restricted to circumstances where the use of deadly force is authorized.

Our General Order states – “d. Except in a life-threatening situation and only as a last resort, members are prohibited from:

1) Using chokeholds or the lateral vascular restraint”

- Although we previously trained and required officers to diffuse or de-escalate a situation when possible prior to the use of protective action, we modified our General Orders to specifically address the use of de-escalation techniques. The amended language from our General Orders is underlined below.
4. Member Response Levels. Members should always try to resolve a situation with the least amount of protective action practicable to achieve compliance with the level of resistance exhibited by the subject.

a. De-Escalation

1) De-escalation tactics and techniques are actions used by officers, when safe and feasible that seek to minimize the likelihood of the need to use force during an incident and increase the likelihood of voluntary compliance.

2) Selection of de-escalation options should be guided by the totality of the circumstances with the goal of attaining voluntary compliance; considerations include:

a. Communication: Using communication intended to gain voluntary compliance such as verbal persuasion, clear instructions, and avoid language that could escalate the incident.

b. Time: Attempt to slow down or stabilize the situation so more time, options, and resources are available for incident resolution.

c. Distance: Maximizing tactical advantage by increasing distance to allow for greater reaction time.

d. Shielding: Utilizing cover and concealment for tactical advantage such as placing barriers between an uncooperative subject and officers.

3) Consider whether any lack of compliance is a deliberate attempt to resist rather than an inability to comply based on factors including, but not limited to medical conditions, mental impairment, developmental disability, physical limitation, language barrier, drug use, behavioral crisis, fear, or anxiety.

4) If a Member(s) is met with resistance, as a subject's level of resistance decreases, the member(s) response shall decrease also.

- Although our General Orders required members to intervene and stop any other member from committing criminal acts, abuses of authority or other major violations of department General Orders, we specifically amended our protective action General Order with the underlined language.

2. Protective Action Guidelines

d. Each department member has the individual responsibility to intervene and stop any other member from committing an unlawful or improper act, including but not limited to, acts of excessive force, abuses of process, abuses of authority, and any other criminal acts or major violations of department General Orders. Successful intervention does not negate a duty to report.

2. We have met multiple times with a number of well-respected community and faith based leaders from Lake Wales. The goal of these meetings has been to learn ways we can better connect with the community, share department progress and discuss challenges we are encountering along the way. We have had healthy and productive discussions that helped identify areas within the department and the community that could help improve relationships and trust.

3. Working with the CRA, we have created a Community Liaison Officer position that will work directly with the community to continue building trusting relationships and addressing concerns. We have selected Officer Edward Palmer, a 20-year veteran of the police department to serve as the Community Liaison Officer. Officer Palmer has worked in every division of the police department and most recently served as the School Resource Officer at Roosevelt Academy. Officer Palmer has a long history of serving the community through outreach and service projects he initiated on his own. He is a husband, father and well-respected member of our department both internally and within the community.

Staffing issues have prevented us from launching the Community Liaison Officer initiative; however, we hope to do so by October 1, 2020. In order to compliment the Community Liaison Officer position, the department intends to partner a less experienced member with Officer Palmer for a period of time on a rotating basis. We believe this will provide an opportunity to mentor our newer members while introducing them to the community and learning how we can serve their needs.

4. We launched a new community outreach initiative known as a Rally Point. These events are designed to provide an opportunity for the public to meet law enforcement officers and members of the command staff, interact with us in a neutral, non-enforcement setting and share ideas that can help improve the quality of life in Lake Wales. We advertise through social media then set up chairs, a tent and signage to identify the event. We bring games to engage the children and cold water to keep everyone hydrated during the summer heat. Thus far, we have hosted three Rally Point events throughout the community and plan to schedule more in future months.
5. All sworn members have attended multiple in-service and online training sessions on situational awareness, community policing, de-escalation, anti-bias policing, implicit bias, officer safety, officer mental health, stress management and COVID-19 awareness topics. The department continues to provide regular, high quality training to our members while the State of Florida Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission works to create additional training specific to current needs.
6. The Police Chief and City Commission recently re-established the Citizens and Police Community Relations Advisory Committee. The purpose of this committee is to:
 - A. Provide a forum for citizens to express their opinions about police procedures and to receive informal information from the police department regarding police procedures.
 - B. Provide a forum for citizens and the police department to openly and respectfully discuss issues of concern with the hope that concerns can be positively resolved.
 - C. Provide a forum for citizens and the police department to engage in a dialogue that will be positive and productive and that will continue to foster a climate of trust and mutual respect.

Staff is working to coordinate the first meeting of this committee, which will likely be hybrid in nature do to social distancing requirements and scheduling conflicts with other boards, committees and meetings.

7. Law Enforcement Accreditation – The police department has been working toward accreditation with the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation, Inc. Accreditation is a voluntary process and based on standards that are reflective of best practices in law enforcement. Accreditation standards cover a variety of roles and responsibilities to include; law enforcement operations, operational support and traffic law enforcement, relationships with other agencies, organization, management and administration and technical services. Much like accreditation for hospitals, colleges and schools, police accreditation involves an outside autonomous agency or group that establishes the professional best-practice standards for departments, as well as ensures the agency is following those standards by conducting a comprehensive onsite assessment.

Accreditation increases the law enforcement agency's ability to prevent and control crime through more effective and efficient delivery of law enforcement services to the community it serves. It enhances community understanding of the law enforcement agency and its role in the community as well as its goals and objectives. Citizen confidence in the policies and practices of the agency is increased. Accreditation, in conjunction with the philosophy of community policing, commits the agency to a broad range of programs that directly benefit the public.

The department currently has a civilian member assigned to the Investigations Division serving as a certified crime analyst and part-time Accreditation Specialist. In order to expedite the accreditation process and dedicate the resources necessary to this critical function, we have assigned Sergeant Stephanie Goreck to oversee the completion of the accreditation program. Sergeant Goreck is an experienced supervisor that is finishing her Master's Degree, has a solid foundation in policing and the proven ability to accomplish challenging tasks.