

https://www.newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/dante-robinson-named-amherst-police-department-s-first-officer-of/article_7a5cf29f-4c64-560b-b090-aa78ec436543.html

FEATURED

'The community loves him'

Dante Robinson named Amherst police department's first Officer of the Year

Justin Faulconer

Jan 16, 2019



Dante Robinson, one of six officers with the Amherst Police Department, was announced as its first Officer of the Year recipient Jan. 9.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

Dante Robinson grew up in Amherst and now patrols it as a police officer, his dream job. “It’s a good community,” said Robinson. “As long as you treat people with respect, of course you’ll get it back. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. I love it here.”

On National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day Jan. 9, Robinson received the distinction of becoming the Amherst Police Department’s first recipient of the Officer of the Year Award. Chief Bobby Shiflett said Robinson went “above and beyond” in serving his duties and the public appreciates his presence.

“The community loves him,” Shiflett said. “Everywhere you go they talk about him.”

Shiflett describes Robinson, 32, as an inspirational officer with a great attitude who brings smiles to the faces of co-workers. Robinson said he truly is honored to receive the recognition and said the town department’s officers all work well together.

Robinson joined the town’s department in June 2017. He has said his goal of becoming an officer started at 14 when he attended a military academy. He previously worked as an officer in Kentucky before returning home to Amherst.



Amherst police officer Dante Robinson is given the town's first Officer of the Year award Jan. 9 by Chief Bobby Shiflett (right). Photo courtesy of Sara Carter

A few months after joining the department, Robinson was among officers who assisted in a September 2017 incident during which a man was accused of shooting and wounding an Amherst County Sheriff's deputy, Lt. Jason Meador. Town officers often assist in county calls as needed, Robinson said.

Meador survived the late-night incident, which began with a traffic stop at the Monroe Post Office. Trevor Dawson Ewers, who was shot and injured by another deputy in the incident and faces two counts of attempted capital murder of a law enforcement officer,

among other charges, awaits a March 28 trial in Amherst County Circuit Court.

The Amherst County Sheriff's Office last summer awarded Robinson with a certificate of commendation for his assistance.

"Any time you get in a situation like that, it was the best outcome," Robinson said of all officers walking away alive or without major injury. "Hopefully, it never happens again to anybody else. But it's a reality. It's a dangerous job."

Amherst County Sheriff's Office Captain John Grieser said Robinson has shown an eagerness and enthusiasm to service.

"He has demonstrated himself in a professional manner throughout his interactions with the Sheriff's Office and community when we have called upon him for assistance," Grieser said.

Robinson has high praise for Shiflett, who recently completed his first year as chief.

"He's awesome," Robinson said. "Since he's been here, he's not about himself. He's about getting us where we need to be in our careers. He wants to make sure we're able to extend our careers as he did. He's a super good person."

Shiflett said the department has come a long way in a year and looks forward this year to moving into its new station on West Court Street, the site of a former restaurant across the street from its current headquarters. He said when the new station opens a

plaque would be placed in the lobby to include every recipient of the police officer of the year moving forward.

“We have a good group of guys here,” Shiflett said of his appreciation for all town officers. “We all work well together. Every one of these guys has stepped up and filled in to make this department something to be proud of.”



Amherst town police officer Dante Robinson prepares to begin his shift Jan. 11.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

https://www.newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/a-lot-of-hard-work-a-lot-of-sacrifice-monelison/article_8d99b9b4-a317-506e-961b-e33c99708362.html

'A lot of hard work, a lot of sacrifice': Monelison Fire Department celebrates 60th anniversary

By Justin Faulconer jfaulconer@newsadvance.com

Sep 11, 2019



Firefighters are honored during the 60th anniversary celebration for the Monelison Volunteer Fire Department on Saturday, Sept. 7, 2019 in Madison Heights.

Photos by Emily Elconin/For the New Era-Progress

In the early days of the Monelison Volunteer Fire Department, long before cellphones or social media, the system for alerting volunteers to emergencies went through a local hotel.

Since it was a 24-hour-a-day business, when a fire or other incident happened the call would go to the person working the desk, who would then notify three department members. Those three would call another three and so on until all 30 or so volunteers

were reached.

“By the time they came to the end of the list the fire was probably over with,” said Ernie Cash, a longtime volunteer of more than 45 years.

The former department chief recalled that story and more during the organization’s 60th anniversary celebration Saturday in Madison Heights. The event featured volunteers and their loved ones reminiscing along with games, food, music and fellowship.

The department started in 1959 following the City of Lynchburg announcing it would no longer provide fire protection to Madison Heights. Concerned citizens and business leaders held the first meeting in the effort to start the organization in July 1959 at the former school on Phelps Road in Madison Heights, Cash said.

The headquarters next to Amelon Elementary School was built a year later and the department began running calls in the early 1960s. The department’s first fire truck, Engine 5, still remains on site, Cash said. He recalled the sacrifices those charter members and founders took to start the agency, saying some took out mortgages on their home and passed around a hat for collections to buy gas following calls.

“They did a fantastic job to build this place,” Cash said. “Back then it was more difficult because they didn’t have the resources we have today.”

Amherst County Board of Supervisors Chairman Jimmy Ayers said the charter members were the foundation of the department and established a tradition of volunteerism the current members are keeping alive.

“They receive not one dime for the nights, days, holidays, whatever it may be,” Ayers said. “When the need arises they are there to serve us. We as a community, we have to support them. We have to recognize what they do and the sacrifices they make for us every day so we can feel safe in our homes and feel secure knowing in our time they will be there.”

Gatherers applauded when the names of all the department’s chiefs were read and honored a moment of silence for Mack Crouch and Aaron Coppedge, two members who died in the line of duty, and Tim Pigg, a fallen firefighter in the Amherst Fire Department.

Cash, a cancer survivor who still teaches in the fire service and is no longer on the active roster, said he is honored to have known every chief in the department and worked under all but two of them. Reading from a personal scrapbook he kept on the agency, he spoke of the dances in the fire station’s second floor and fundraisers that had members sending out 8,000 letters.

He said the “Monelison” title came from combining Monroe, Elon and Madison Heights and recalled the addition of two fire stations, one on Lyttleton Lane in Madison Heights in 1967 and another in Elon in the mid-1970s. Cash paused while remembering Crouch, who died from injuries sustained in battling a brush fire in 1964 and Coppedge, who died from a structure fire in 1980.

Cash referred to firefighters as a “special breed” and recognized their family members who stood by them while they served long hours away from home.

“A lot of hard work, a lot of sacrifice, has gone into this department,” Cash said.

Assistant Chief Jason Friend, who has served roughly 19 years, said without the support of the community the department couldn't continue and thanked all who have given toward it.

Friend said the department now has close to 30 members. The agency also thanked Nancy Peters for a donation that Friend said allowed for recent improvements to the second floor of the main station. The enhancements completed in early 2019 include a men's and women's bunkroom, a fully furnished updated kitchen and showers for men and women as well as a washer and drier, according to Friend.

The department is open to new members and Friend urges residents to consider volunteering if they want to make a positive difference in the community.

"If you're looking for a paycheck it's not here. But if you're looking for a reward knowing that you went home every day to help somebody, that's where your reward is," Friend said. "That's why I do it."

Pat Day, the department's first female firefighter who joined in 1986, was among gatherers Saturday. She and her husband, Lee Day, a former chief, were the first husband-wife duo to serve in a county fire department, Cash said.

Day said she has fond memories of volunteering and spending much time serving the department along with her husband.

"I love helping others," she said. "It was better than getting paid."

Reach Justin Faulconer at (434) 385-5551.

https://www.newsadvance.com/new_era_progress/news/amherst-county-sheriff-deputies-on-dangerous-calls-need-more-pay/article_02fd2ccf-049f-5b53-85de-dd71de780175.html

FEATURED

Amherst County sheriff: Deputies on dangerous calls need more pay

Justin Faulconer
Jan 30, 2019



Sheriff E.W. Viar at a July 2016 vigil outside the Amherst County Sheriff's Office honoring law enforcement officers.
Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

In his 34-year career in law enforcement, Amherst County Sheriff E.W. Viar has worked positions such as courtroom bailiff in Lynchburg and Amherst deputy tasked with responding to an array of 911 calls.

While every job in law enforcement is important, Viar said, he feels it is “ludicrous” officers in his department on the front lines dealing with dangerous situations are not better compensated.

“It’s frustrating,” said Viar. “We’re trying to get our police officers decent money for what they do.”

The Amherst County Sheriff’s Office recently joined the Virginia Law Enforcement Sheriffs, which formed last summer with a goal to provide pay increases for 86 of the 123 sheriff’s offices in Virginia with primary law enforcement duties, meaning they respond to 911 calls.

Some localities, such as the city of Lynchburg, have sheriff’s offices that mainly handle courthouse security, serve civil process documents for the court system and temporary detention orders and are called on for assistance as needed but do not respond to 911 calls.

Viar said he was in Richmond in mid-January, along with other law enforcement representatives from more than two-dozen agencies, to show support for a VLES presentation before state legislators. Amherst County Sheriff’s Capt. John Grieser said the purpose of the group’s visit was to bring awareness to the difference in deputies’ responsibilities and how retaining and recruiting officers is difficult.

A state budget amendment has been introduced to consider a 9.3 percent salary increase for deputies with primary law enforcement duties, according to Virginia Legislative Information System website.

Viar said the vast majority of his office of roughly 50 law enforcement officers are highly trained and work dangerous jobs, but make less than other agencies where the risk isn't as high. The starting salary for his deputies is \$32,700, he said, and the office has lost several officers recently to higher paid positions elsewhere.

Three Amherst County deputies recently were offered jobs with the Amherst Town Police Department where the starting pay is higher, he said, and he considers it a miracle they stayed. Viar feels a study is needed to distinguish the duties of deputies across jurisdictions and pay those with "hazard duty" more.

"Until someone does something, we're in bad shape," Viar said.

He mentioned two shootings in Amherst County in the past year and a half that resulted in two deputies getting shot. Lt. Jason Meador was shot and injured in a September 2017 incident at the Monroe Post Office parking lot that involved a Monroe man accused of shooting him during a scuffle and Deputy Michael Baldwin was shot in August 2018 shooting between a Waynesboro man who died from a self-inflicted wound and several deputies just off U.S. 29 in northern Amherst County. Both deputies survived in the two incidents and returned to their duties after separate state police investigations. Viar, who is wrapping up his first term this year and plans to run for re-election in November, said it's difficult recruiting officers while factoring in low pay and the national trend of police officers getting wounded and many killed in the line of duty.

"We need to take care of them," said Viar. "I think we need to pay them the lawful money they deserve. I'm not out to beat anybody down. I just want to do what's right."

Lynchburg Sheriff Donald Sloan, who oversees an agency of about 30 deputies, said while he respects and appreciates the needs and mission of VLES he feels the lobbying effort is divisive. Where one previous group, the Virginia Sheriff's Association, went to state legislators seeking help now there are two.

“We all have budgetary needs, we all have manpower needs,” Sloan said. “All of this is a dangerous job.”

He said he is hoping the effort has positive effects and said he wants to see sheriff’s offices with primary law enforcement duties succeed. The camaraderie among area law enforcement remains strong, he said, and he is not offended by VLES’s efforts.

“My hats are off to them,” Sloan said. “I’m just sad it’s come to this because it’s like robbing Peter to pay Paul. I wish them the best. I have no ill feeling. I feel like law enforcement in general is underpaid for this line of work ... But again, I hear what they’re saying. They’ve got a big job to do.”

He said his office’s deputies mainly keep courthouses secure and handle transports while making arrests when offenses are committed in their presence.

“The more we can work together to provide public safety ... our citizens are better served,” he said of cooperation among area agencies. “I want to see them succeed and be provided for. I just don’t like things that divide.”

Viar said officers from Bedford, Nelson and Campbell counties’ sheriff’s offices also were in Richmond earlier this month in support of the effort.

Grayson County Sheriff Richard A. Vaughan, president of VLES, said in an Oct. 15 news release it was compelled to form a new association to address the specific needs of localities. Vaughan in the release cited the turnover rate for deputy sheriffs is at an all-time high of 21 percent.

“It’s a disgrace that our hardworking law enforcement deputies place their lives on the line daily and still qualify for public assistance and food stamps,” Vaughan said in the release.

Grieser said a state trooper may be assigned to a county like Amherst and makes \$12,000 more than a deputy but the trooper only is responsible for traffic enforcement unless requested by the local sheriff’s office for assistance. Rather than an across the board pay raise, Grieser said VLES is lobbying for a pay hike specifically earmarked for deputies responding to crimes and violent situations.

He said there is a clear distinction in those deputies’ responsibilities and risks.

“Until the pay is disparity is addressed we will continue to see turnover for jobs of less responsibility and greater pay,” Grieser said in an email. “The VLES is simply seeking a fair deal to what largely amounts to underpaid rural Sheriff’s deputies.”

JUSTIN FAULCONER

Contact Justin Faulconer at (434) 385-5551 or jfaulconer@newsadvance.com.