

Rappahannock News

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BEHIND THE BADGE

► A look at the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office

'Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It.'

Rappahannock native Connie Compton leads law enforcement in a 'small town' county

BY BOB HURLEY
For Foothills Forum

At the tender age of seven, Connie Compton was already riding around in a patrol car. Not one of the cruisers you see on the roads of Rappahannock County, but a little blue pedal police car.

"I had the police car, and my brother had the fire truck," she said. "We had a long driveway, and we'd go up and down it play-acting cops and firefighters, complete with making siren sounds."

**FOOTHILLS FORUM/
RAPP NEWS
Special Report**
Part 1 of 2

That was the beginning of Sheriff Connie S. Compton's storied career in law enforcement. Now, at age 53, the popular four-term sheriff heads the county's largest public safety agency, overseeing a staff of 23 sworn officers and civilians and an annual budget just shy of \$2 million, all toiling amid heightened scrutiny of the role of police in U.S. communities.



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Sheriff Connie Compton at the Laurel Mills Store, where at age 14 she used to stock the shelves for \$10 a week.

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Department is smaller than its neighbors → Page 16

THE PEOPLE
Meet the faces behind the badges → Pages 14-15

Trial date set in long standing zoning dispute ► Page 6 Let's talk about the library ► Page 17



WASHINGTON FINE PROPERTIES
THE PREMIER BROKERAGE FIRM
REPRESENTING THE CAPITAL REGION AND THE VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDE

Meet the new Social Services director

As the new director of Rappahannock's DSS, Gail Crooks says her first priority is to really understand the unique strengths and challenges of the county. 7



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SHERIFF

From Page 1

Born into a family with deep Rappahannock roots, Compton was the youngest of 10 children. "We lived in a house in Castleton just behind the Laurel Mills Store," she recalled. "Growing up here was idyllic, with lots of friends and family. All of us attended Rappahannock schools."

It was Career Day in 1985 at the high school when Compton decided to go into law enforcement.

"I met a female state trooper and knew then and there I wanted to go into law enforcement. When I graduated in 1985, I didn't have the money to go to college," she said. So eventually she started work in 1988 at the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office (RCSO) as a communications and corrections officer.

Climbing the ladder

On a wall in Compton's office hangs a sign: "Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It."

Within two years after joining the force, she was promoted to patrol deputy, the first woman to hold that position in Rappahannock County. In 2001, she was promoted to sergeant and in 2003 to lieutenant.

In 2007, she was elected sheriff in a three-way race, garnering 47 percent of the vote. Compton was re-elected in 2011 with 79 percent of the vote and again in 2015 with 72 percent. She ran unopposed in 2019, receiving 97 percent of all ballots cast. Altogether, she has more than 30 years of service at RCSO, 13 of them as sheriff. Of the 123 elected sheriffs in Virginia, Compton is one of eight women who hold that office; she ranks 27th in seniority.

"It was difficult moving up through the ranks. Being the first female deputy on the force, I had to overcome many obstacles," she said. "At one point it was so uncomfortable, I felt I couldn't do anything right even though I was handling calls for service, arresting more DUIs, and making more arrests than other deputies. I was so frustrated I thought of leaving the force and becoming a firefighter. But I decided to stay on."

"When Gary Settle became sheriff," she said, "he recognized my hard work and helped shape me for the position I now am so honored to hold. I was proud to serve under a man of his caliber." Settle went on to become Virginia State Police Superintendent.

'Small town' county

Growing up in Rappahannock gives Compton a window into the community that sheriffs in large jurisdictions often don't have. She has a personal style that combines an authentic 'down-home' friendliness with a no-nonsense approach to law enforcement.

"I love our small community," she said. "Its size provides a special opportunity to get to know people and build trust and a level of sensitivity as to how we do our

jobs. Having that trust between the sheriff's office and the citizens is key in community policing."

"There are people out in the world today that don't trust law enforcement. I don't think we have that here. We don't have many complaints about our deputies. No one is perfect, but I certainly won't

tolerate any inappropriate behavior on the force."

Given the national discussion about policing, Foothills Forum asked Sheriff Compton about race and the county's law enforcement practices. She said her office has never received a complaint about racial profiling. Compton said citizen complaints



Compton grew up in the county and was active in sports at Rappahannock County High School, including basketball (seen above in the 1983-84 season) and track and field.



COURTESY PHOTOS

"IT WAS DIFFICULT MOVING UP through the ranks. Being the first female deputy on the force, I had to overcome many obstacles ... I was so frustrated I thought of leaving the force and becoming a firefighter. But I decided to stay on."

— Sheriff Connie Compton

typically have been for things like officers not being sufficiently polite when writing a ticket or driving too fast when responding to a call. Under Virginia law, citizen complaints are considered personnel files and are exempt under the state's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Compton stated that she and her deputies have discussed racial bias in policing in the past years as part of a continuing "cultural diversity" training program. She declined to comment on the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, convicted Tuesday on three counts of murder and manslaughter in the death of George Floyd.

The Rappahannock News has submitted a FOIA request to the Virginia State Police to obtain records subject to the Community Policing Act of 2020 to evaluate county traffic stop data. The News will report the findings if it is successful in obtaining the data.

Compton described the community as a big family and occasionally that leads to citizens wanting favors for minor infractions. "No sir. We have a job to do," she said. "I was elected to enforce the law. That's what we get paid to do."

Community outreach

A small community also allows RCSO to provide services with a "personal touch." Seniors who live alone can register on a checklist to be called daily. Residents who go on vacation can have their homes checked by a deputy. Commercial buildings are periodically checked. Accidental 911 calls are always followed up with a visit just to make sure the call was a mistake.

"We have a lot of elderly folks living here, many of them alone," said Compton. "If we don't hear from the folks who signed up on the call list every day by 11 a.m., we'll call them, or if need be, send a deputy to check on them. We've found people who have fallen, broken a hip or had other trouble." →

NEXT WEEK

- **Riding along:** Going out on patrol with a sheriff's deputy
- **"Drugs are everywhere":** One thing is driving the county's crime rate
- **"What's your emergency?":** A night in the department's nerve center
- **Anatomy of an arrest:** How getting taken into custody transpires



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

Compton recalled a song by Miranda Lambert, "The House That Built Me," in front of a house feet away from her childhood home.

➔ On occasion, the sheriff herself will pick up the phone to check on people's well-being. Compton also lectures before community groups about public safety practices or the latest consumer and internet scams, especially those targeting the county's senior citizens.

Other community programs are sponsored by RCSO through the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Children's Foundation (RCSCF), a nonprofit funded by individual donations and fundraising events. Programs include:

- The long-running "Shop with a Deputy" during the Christmas season, where deputies take kids shopping for gifts and a visit with Santa.
- The Jingle Bell 5K walk/run which raises funds for the RCSCF.
- Sponsorship of Camp Fantastic, a week-long camp for kids with cancer at the 4-H Center in Front Royal.
- Donations of school supplies and backpacks, as well as various coaching and athletic activities.

Compton particularly enjoys coaching kids' softball, a sport at which she excelled during her school years. Soon the RCSO will implement "Project Lifesaver," a voluntary program that can track individuals with Alzheimer's or other dementia-related illnesses should they become lost.

'Stretched thin'

Unlike sheriff's offices in more populous counties, RCSO officers often find themselves doing multiple tasks. "Everyone does a little bit of everything and we get paid a lot less money than those in other jurisdictions who only have one job," said Compton. "Our communications staff takes 911 calls, makes the dispatches, does criminal background checks, record filing, and

answers general inquiries. In other sheriff's offices, there is a person for each of those jobs."

"We are stretched thin," she said. "If one deputy on patrol at night needs backup, and many times they do, the other deputy has to respond. If another call or two comes in from across the county at the same time, things can get really dicey. It's not easy to be in two places at once."

In serious cases, Compton may call deputies at home or seek assistance from law enforcement in a neighboring jurisdiction as she did with the Fauquier County Sheriff's Office during a high-speed chase into that county several months ago.

Teamwork helps manage the workload. "The sheriff has built a tight-knit family here," said Lt. Janie Jenkins, division commander of RCSO's communication center. "There's the old saying, 'money isn't everything' and when the chips are down or one of us needs help, we pitch in for each other."

'Empty' guns kill people

Last year, when Rappahannock and other Virginia county supervisors were passing resolutions to designate their communities as "Second Amendment Sanctuaries," Compton issued a statement that broadly supported the action, saying she believed a message needed to be sent to Richmond that citizens will take a stance on gun rights. "My deputies and I take an oath to uphold the Constitution and that is what we will do," she said.

But Compton strongly believes that with gun ownership comes a high level of responsibility. Over the course of her career, she has seen a number of gun-related accidents, including one that tragically struck her family when she was four years old.

"It was Christmas in 1972. Our extended family was gathered at my grandmother's house and one of my older cousins had received a gun as a present," she recalled. "As he was showing it to my brothers, he didn't realize there was a bullet in the chamber. His finger was on the trigger. As my 15-year-old sister was walking toward me the gun went off and killed her. I remember everything that happened that night like it was yesterday. We are all still living with that horrible memory.

"Empty' guns kill people, so goes the saying. I'm a firm believer in firearms training and that includes learning how to shoot responsibly. People need to know how to handle and fire a weapon before carrying it. And for a concealed weapons permit, people should attend class in person, not on a computer."

Greatest success

When asked to name her greatest accomplishment, Compton paused. "It's always hard to talk about yourself," she said. "I try and stay humble. In a small jurisdiction like Rappahannock, the people that put you here, the people you serve, they have to trust you and you have to earn their trust. So, I have to say my greatest accomplishment is being able to serve the citizens of Rappahannock County in a way that promotes that trust."

Compton said she is planning to run again in 2023. "Of course I'm going to run again. I greatly enjoy my law enforcement work as well as participating in our community programs," she said.

Perhaps that's why Compton's fond of quoting her favorite action hero, Wonder Woman: "I fight for those who cannot fight for themselves."

WHAT IS Foothills FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit

tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

► More at foothillsforum.org

What do you think?

Send feedback to editor@rappnews.com



Meet the Sheriff's Office

Here are the people behind the badges



Roger Jenkins

Major/Chief Deputy

Time on job: 25 years.

Best part: I'm proud to have worked here my entire career and with our current Sheriff during that time. It is an honor to work in the county where I have lived all my life and to serve all of the people.

Biggest challenge: Keeping officers here at our office. Being a small department, when an officer leaves, it becomes an immediate and urgent situation. Pulling officers from one shift to another cuts law enforcement coverage across the board. Keeping up with officers' training hours and certifications in their fields is also challenging. Our main goal is to serve the people and be able to go home to our families at the end of our shifts.



Jim Jones

Captain/Investigator

Time on job: Five years.

Best part: Being able to help victims of crime, accidents and domestic violence and making a positive impact on our community.

Biggest challenge: Knowing and keeping up with the new laws of the Commonwealth (of Virginia).



Lt. M. Cody Dodson

Patrol Division Commander

Time on job: 11 years.

Best part: Helping the people of Rappahannock County where I was raised. I train and mentor new law enforcement officers. Watching them grow and put together everything they learned at the academy and in the field is very rewarding.

Biggest challenge: The fast-changing environment and keeping up with new laws being passed every year can be very stressful and time-consuming. At the supervisor level, it is never easy managing a group of people you work with day in and day out, especially when you have

formed a bond of trust with each other. Going out on the road and handling calls with the deputies has made it easier to do that. They know you're not sitting behind a desk second-guessing each decision they make.



Jason Bates

Deputy

Time on job: 14 months.

Best part: Having to multitask and make split-second decisions that ultimately affect someone. Feeling rewarded when you help someone in need. Getting out and talking to the citizens of the county.

Biggest challenge: Dealing with the evolving perception of law enforcement. I try to show everyone we are human. ... We are sons, fathers, daughters and mothers trying to provide for and enjoy a happy life like everyone else.



Mark Currence

Deputy

Time on job: 24 years.

Best part: Working with Rappahannock County High School staff to provide a safe environment and forming positive relationships with the students.

Biggest challenge: Helping students learn from their mistakes so they can make better choices in the future.



Robert Lee Fincham, Jr.

Deputy

Time on job: 22 years.

Best part: Interacting with students at Rappahannock County Elementary School as a School Resource Officer.

Biggest challenge: COVID-19 restrictions that limit interactions with people at our annual Sheriff's Office events such as DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) Day and Shop with a Deputy.



Crystal Jenkins

Deputy

Time on job: Nine years.

Best part: Community policing and helping the citizens of our county.

Biggest challenge: Being a target and the negative public perception of law enforcement.



David Meade

Deputy

Time on job: Three years.

Best part: Protecting and serving.

Biggest challenge: Dealing with the negativity from the public toward law enforcement.



Tommy Sisk

Deputy

Time on job: 3.5 years.

Best part: As a lifelong resident of Rappahannock County, I like interacting with many of the legendary 'old-timers' here. As Paul Harvey said, they give you the rest of the story.

Biggest challenge: The perception of law enforcement today. This is a different ballgame now from when I first worked as a deputy for a year in 1988. I fear for the future recruitment of law enforcement officers.

Compiled by
BOB HURLEY
For Foothills Forum



W. Chris Ubben

Deputy

Time on job: 14 years.

Best part: As a School Resource Officer, my interactions with children. Being able to show them that “cops are good, well-intentioned people who want to help them” and not “take them to jail” like some parents have told them.

Biggest challenge: Sufficient staffing to be able to maintain the needed number of deputies on all shifts to meet the needs of our citizens. With the aggressions shown towards law enforcement and for officer safety, we need positions added to make sure two deputies are able to respond to service calls and traffic stops.



Lt. Janie Jenkins

Division Commander, Communications Center

Time on job: 18 years.

Best part: I love teamwork and the ability to help those who need it. No matter how large or small (the matter), helping is so rewarding.

Biggest challenge: Cell service. At times callers are 15 to 20 minutes past the emergency before they are able to connect with us.



Logan Davis

Deputy and Communications Officer

Time on job: One year, eight months.

Best part: Getting to help and speak with the citizens of Rappahannock County on their worst days.

Biggest challenge: Not every day is the same. There is always a new way to carry out your duties, and how you can help every single caller.



Amanda Frazier

Communications Officer

Time on job: 11 months.

Best part: I enjoy the work environment and the ability to maintain a close connection with my community.

Biggest challenge: Learning to separate myself from emergency calls, especially when they come from people I know and love.



Gary Jenkins

Communications Officer

Time on job: Two and half years.

Best part: The unpredictability and being able to help people.

Biggest challenge: There is only so much we can do from this side of the headset. Not being able to do more is sometimes hard.



Donna Kestner

Deputy and Communications Officer

Time on job: 13 years.

Best part: Being a voice of calm in harrowing situations. Knowing that your work serves a greater good.

Biggest challenge: As a deputy, public perception of law enforcement, officers being a target, and combating the drug epidemic. As a communications officer, lack of mental health support (for callers), thinking about the skills, knowledge and experience needed to master each component of the job, and a lack of closure on some of the calls.



Jennifer Woodward

Communications Officer

Time on job: Three weeks.

Best part: I am still in training. I took this position so I could be more involved and give back to the community. I feel this is a job I can be proud of and look forward to learning all I can.



Vicki Jenkins Miller

Communications Officer

Time on job: Four years.

Best part: Helping people any way I can. Speaking to our amazing seniors. They bring me so much joy.

Biggest challenge: When the outcome unfolds during a call you need to set that in the back of your mind, complete the call to the best of your ability and process it emotionally later.



Brandon Stroupe

Communications Officer

Time on job: Three months.

Best part: Being there for people in their time of need. Working alongside officers and first responders to make the community a safer place.

Biggest challenge: As a first responder in my free time, not being able to be on the scene to physically help others.



Sheila Walter

Communications Officer

Time on job: 37 years.

Best part: Sending help to those in need.

Biggest challenge: Not all calls or complaints have happy endings.



Jasmine Weaver

Communications Officer

Time on job: Four years.

Best part: Making a difference in someone's day.

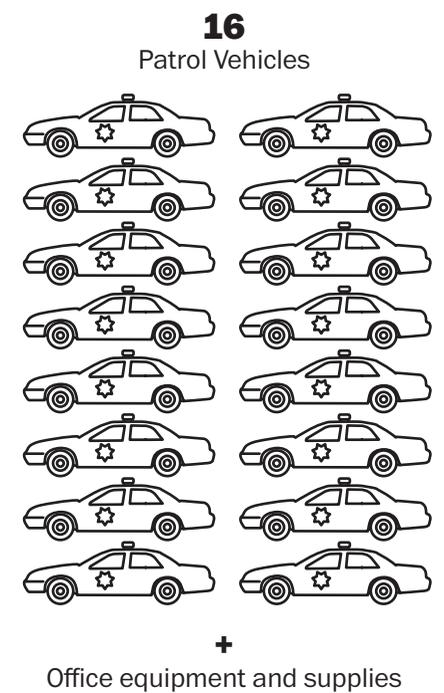
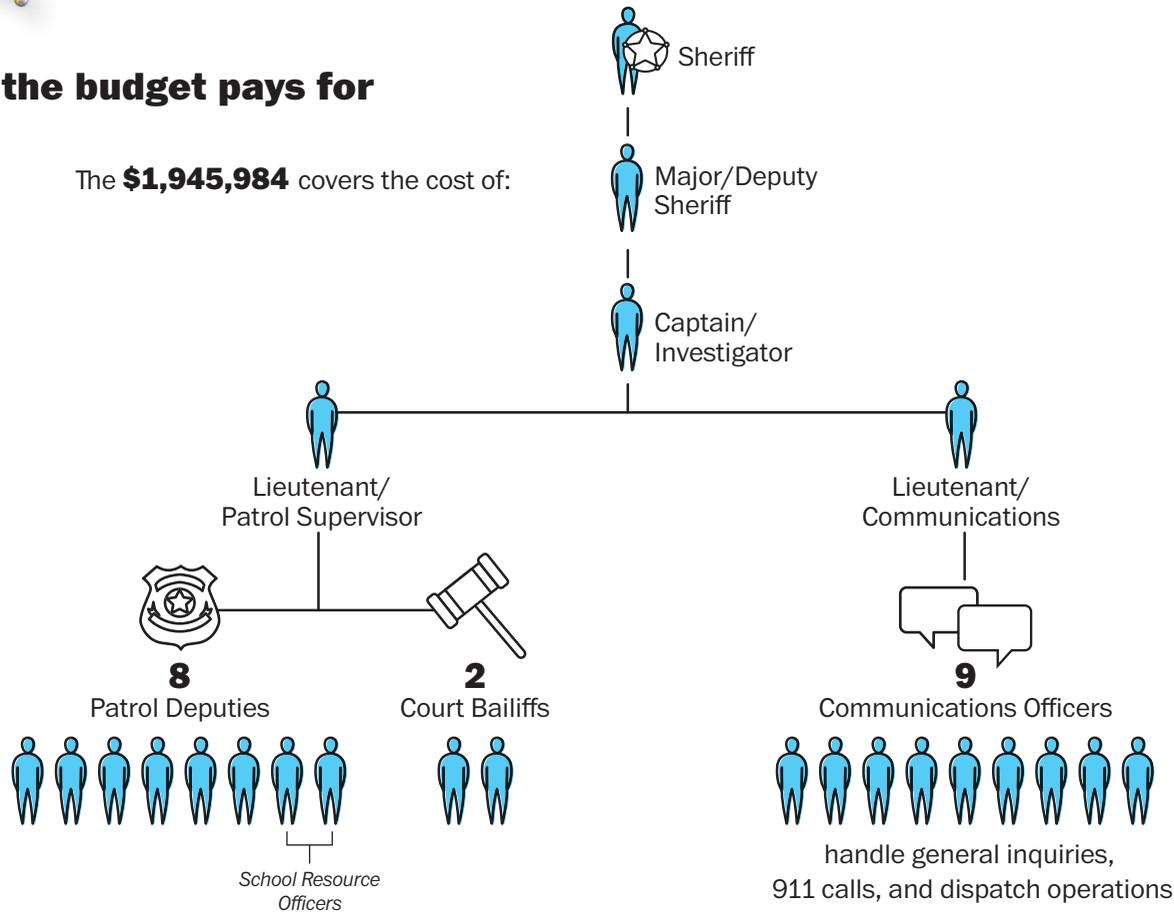
Biggest challenge: There are calls you take home with you, replay, and think of what you may have done differently.

Photographs by
LUKE CHRISTOPHER
For Foothills Forum



What the budget pays for

The **\$1,945,984** covers the cost of:



THE ORGANIZATION

Department is smaller than neighboring agencies

By **BOB HURLEY**
For Foothills Forum

In fiscal year 2021, Rappahannock County budgeted \$1,945,984 for the Sheriff's Office, about 7.3 percent of the county's overall budget. The cost covers 14 sworn officers, two court bailiffs, and nine communications staffers who handle general inquiries, 911 calls, and dispatch operations. The budget also includes 16 patrol vehicles, office equipment and supplies.

The RCSO force is smaller when compared with several neighboring counties. On a per capita basis there is one sworn officer per 455 residents. A sworn officer is vested with full law enforcement powers and authority. By comparison, neighboring Warren

County has one sworn officer for 360 residents; this includes officers from the Front Royal Police Department.

Base starting pay for a new deputy is \$34,474, an amount set by the State Compensation Board. However, RCSO often hires new deputies in the \$36,000 to \$38,000 range, relying on county funds to cover the difference. By comparison Warren County pays its newly hired deputies \$42,406 annually.

Deputies receive their law enforcement training at the Skyline Regional Criminal Justice Academy in Middleton, Va., which includes required continuing education and recertification every two years through the academy's Police One program. The program covers anti-

bias, civil rights, cultural awareness, community policing and responding to emotional or mental health situations. Officers are also trained to administer roadside sobriety tests, radar speed measurements, and doses of NARCAN, used to counteract the life-threatening effects of an opioid overdose.

Deputies and civilian staff work 12-hour shifts that usually change at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. To ensure staffers get every other weekend off, shifts alternate two or three days a week with two days off in between. During the day shift there is usually one patrol deputy on duty and at night two patrol deputies. On weekends, two patrol deputies and a supervisor work the night shift.

THE BUDGET

Stretched thin

By **PATTY HARDEE**
For Foothills Forum

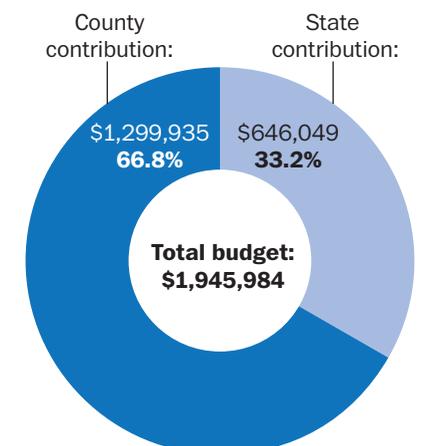
On a Friday evening in March, the one Rappahannock County Sheriff's deputy assigned to night patrol was detailed to an incident in which a Page County deputy was killed in the line of duty. That left Rappahannock, a county of nearly 270 square miles, without an on-duty patrol officer for several hours.

That illustrates how thin the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office is. But while adding more officers would be nice, budget constraints stand in the way. And to a certain degree, the number of deputies Sheriff Connie Compton can afford is limited by the state's contribution to her budget.

"The state Compensation Board tells us how many deputies we will have," she said, somewhat figuratively. The amount of the state contribution has risen modestly in recent years and in the current fiscal year accounts for roughly a third of Compton's budget for office salaries and benefits.

Sheriff's budget by the numbers

for the current fiscal year:



Sheriff's percentage of county budget: **7.3%**

GRAPHICS BY LAURA STANTON FOR FOOHILLS FORUM



Sheriff Connie Compton, second from left, in her morning briefing with Communications Officer Jennifer Woodward, Lt. Janie Jenkins, and Major Roger Jenkins.

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM



'Drugs are everywhere'

But county consistently has had among the lowest violent crime rates in Va.

BY PATTY HARDEE
For Foothills Forum

Rappahannock County is blessed with one of the lowest serious crime rates in Virginia. So what worries Rappahannock County Sheriff Connie Compton?

"When you ask about crime in the county, one of my biggest concerns is drugs," Compton said. "You know, 20 years ago, probably the biggest drug you had to worry about was marijuana. But now you have heroin and meth. And they are more and more potent."

"There are some people who don't believe it's here," she said, "but drugs are everywhere."

Between 2015 and last year, the Sheriff's Office made 245 arrests related to drugs and narcotics, or roughly 45 percent of all arrests that fall in the "violent crime" category.

Data for that period, supplied by Sheriff's Office Lt. Janie Jenkins, shows drug-related arrests peaked in 2018-2019. For 2018 they represented over 63 percent of all violent crimes in the county, and nearly 60 percent for 2019. Since then, drug arrests have tapered off.

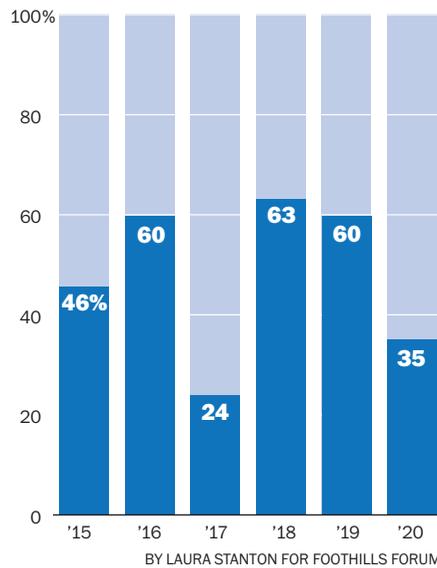
Property crimes — such as arson, burglary and larceny — account for the bulk of arrests in the violent crime category.

"Breaking and entering larcenies have gone down," said Compton. "What helps is that people have put cameras on their houses, and they have alarms, so that's helped [keep those kinds of crimes down] a lot, too. In that way, the community is helping us as we are helping the community. Everybody is working together."

Crime data for Virginia's 95 counties show that in recent years Rappahannock consistently has had among the fewest arrests per 100,000 population for violent crimes, including murder,

Violent crime often drug-related

Percentage of violent crimes in Rappahannock that are drug-related



drugs and aggravated assault. The ranking is similarly low for property crimes, including burglaries, larcenies and vehicle thefts.

But Rappahannock registered in the middle of the pack for drug arrests as recently as 2017.

It's one thing to talk about statistics and another to experience crimes up close and personal, as law enforcement officers do every day.

One such incident happened at the 211 Quicke Mart on Lee Highway in November 2020 when, after rampaging through the store, a man with a knife attacked deputy Chris Ubben, cutting the officer's pants. The man was tasered by another officer and charged with multiple serious offenses, including attempted malicious wounding of a police officer and assault on a police officer.

Compton herself was involved in a high-speed chase last year through Rappahannock, Culpeper and Fauquier counties, the driver crossing over Route 211 at times and driving against traffic. He eventually lost control of the vehicle and ran into a tree.

"A little exciting, a little scary," Compton said of the pursuit. "You don't know what the other vehicle will do, you don't know what your own vehicle will do. You have other people traveling on the road," in this case driving west on Route 211 with a stolen vehicle coming east toward them at a high rate of speed.

"You have to [pursue] in the safest manner you can," the sheriff said. "Fortunately, nobody got hurt."



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM

"A little exciting, a little scary," Sheriff Connie Compton said of the high-speed pursuit she participated in last year.

Editor's note: In addition to interviews with the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office, data for this story is drawn from sources including the Virginia State Police, the Virginia Sheriff's Association, and the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Criminal Justice Research Center. Although these data sources may collect and analyze information differently, every effort has been made to ensure that the statistics quoted in this series accurately reflect the nature of law enforcement in Rappahannock and other counties. Meanwhile, the Rappahannock News has a pending Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the Virginia State Police seeking available data about traffic stops by the Sheriff's Office.

BY BOB HURLEY
For Foothills Forum

Although no one was arrested during the March 5 ride-along (see story on facing page), Lt. Cody Dodson explained arrest procedures using a domestic disturbance as an example.

"If a family member is physically assaulted in a domestic situation, Virginia law requires that one of the parties be identified and arrested," he said. "It is the job of the officer on the scene to determine the primary aggressor by interviewing and taking statements from all the subjects on the scene. It can get complicated, and frankly emotional, especially when there are a number of people involved. It is especially challenging if there is only one officer able to respond."

These are the procedures usually followed for a domestic disturbance:

Once the officer on the scene evaluates the evidence and determines probable cause, the primary aggressor is taken into custody.

The suspect is transported to the Sheriff's Office, where the officer does a background check for any criminal history and finishes preparing the complaint.

The suspect and the charging officer then appear before a magistrate. In Rappahannock County this procedure is conducted by video conference with magistrates in either Loudoun or Fauquier counties.

Based on the officer's criminal complaint, the magistrate will determine if there is probable cause to issue an arrest warrant.



Anatomy of an arrest

Once an arrest warrant is issued, the magistrate will go into a bond hearing and determine whether the suspect should be released or sent to the regional jail in neighboring Warren County. The magistrate may allow the suspect to pay bail in order to be released from jail. The magistrate determines the amount based on factors like the severity of the alleged crime and the likelihood the defendant may flee rather than show up for trial. Suspects unable to afford bail may turn to bail bond companies that provide a "surety bond" making them liable for the full bail amount if the defendant fails to show for trial. These companies charge a fee that typically is 10-15 percent of the bail amount.

Dodson explained the aftermath of an arrest for a domestic situation can be a long, drawn-out process sometimes requiring protective orders issued for victims. If children are involved the social services department is notified.

For a traffic stop involving a Driving Under the Influence (DUI) of alcohol, the driver is administered roadside tests that can detect impairment.

Three standardized tests are typically administered:

▶ "Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus" test moving a stimulus like a pen back and forth across the face to detect involuntary twitches in the eyes.

▶ "Walk and Turn" test where subjects are asked to walk in a straight line, turn around, and return.

▶ "One Leg Stand" test where a subject is asked to stand on one leg for 30 seconds.

The driver may be asked to take a Breathalyzer (BPA) test on the scene but has the option to decline. "I've pretty much made up my mind as to the level of impairment using the three standardized tests, so the BPA is not usually key in making a determination," said Dodson. "If a driver is taken into custody, they are required to take a more sophisticated blood alcohol content (BAC) test at the station. Those results are sent directly to a state forensics lab in Richmond for later use in judicial proceedings."

With drivers on narcotics, impairment may be harder to detect. An advanced test is often used to determine an individual's internal "time clock." The suspect is asked to close their eyes, tilt their head back and estimate the passage of 30 seconds. If they have taken a stimulant or depressant, their response will likely speed up or slow down. Other tests measuring finger dexterity and eye movement are also used.

Once a narcotics-impaired driver is taken into custody, the suspect is transported to a hospital emergency room for a blood draw to determine narcotics in the bloodstream. Following that, the same arrest procedures are followed as in a DUI case.



Lt. Cody Dodson during a traffic stop earlier this year.

BY BOB HURLEY FOR Foothills FORUM

On patrol

BY BOB HURLEY
For Foothills Forum

On Friday, March 5, this reporter spent several hours on a “ride-along” with Lt. Cody Dodson, Sheriff’s Office patrol division commander, during his 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift.

The Ford Explorer looked roomy from the outside. But inside seating was cramped, the front cabin crammed with assorted communications gear, radar equipment and an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. The trunk was filled with two “go bags” which contained medical supplies to treat gunshot wounds in active shooter situations, a 12-gauge shotgun, a .22-caliber rifle needed to put down injured animals, extra ammunition clips, crime scene “totes” for evidence collection, photography equipment, flares, traffic cones, a kit for unlocking vehicles, a first aid kit, and an AED automatic defibrillator.

Although Lt. Dodson was well prepared for most any kind of situation, it would be a relatively quiet Friday night — four traffic stops, one minor accident with no injuries, and an injured animal in the road.

DEPUTIES ON DUTY

Dodson and two other deputies on duty, Chris Ubben and Tommy Sisk, were responsible that night for patrolling all 266 square miles in the county. On weekend nights three patrol cars are usually on duty, unless someone calls in sick. “We are often spread thin and just too small a force for each of us to cover specific zones,” said Dodson. “Rather, we travel areas

‘There is no such thing as a routine traffic stop’

of our choosing with no set pattern, mostly on secondary roads, and monitor each other’s whereabouts.”

During their 12-hour shift, deputies are required to spend several hours conducting “selective enforcement,” police jargon for traffic enforcement. We spent time at two stakeouts, one on Viewtown Road and the other on U.S. 522 in Sperryville. Four vehicles were pulled over for speeding, two at each location. Only one driver, who was traveling 21 mph over the speed limit, received a summons. The other three, although traveling in excess of the speed limit, were given warnings.

Why?
“When it comes to traffic stops officers still have discretion when issuing a ticket,” said Dodson. “If the driver has a good record, is polite, or has a credible excuse, I take that into account. A lot also depends on the time of day and traffic volume. If a stream of cars is going by at 10 miles an hour over the speed limit, I won’t stop them. But if one is going 15 miles an hour over, I’ll pull it over.”

He added: “There is no safety in numbers” for speeders. Radar has become so sophisticated it can identify a car in a group that is moving faster than the rest.

Discretion also depends on the type of enforcement being conducted. “If I’m looking for DUIs and it is midnight with a few cars coming by, I’ll stop someone going 10 miles per hour over the limit,” he said. “Will I write them a

ticket? Probably not. But if it turns out to be a DUI, that’s a different matter. We don’t exercise discretion for DUIs, or drivers impaired by drugs.

“Our number one priority is to respond to calls from dispatch to protect the people who call in, and number two is to keep the roads safe as possible from DUIs, narcotics and dangerous driving behavior.”

NOTHING IS ROUTINE

Two months ago, a police officer in Page County was fatally shot during a traffic stop. The assailant shot the officer before he could get out of his patrol vehicle.

“There is no such thing as a routine traffic stop,” said Dodson. “That’s one thing I drill into our new deputies during training.”

The lieutenant explained that every traffic stop is different. “Your intuition can tell you a lot,” he said. “Things can go bad in a matter of seconds so you can never let your guard down.

“Until you deem otherwise, you have to approach it as if that person is going to kill you. Our number one goal, aside from protecting the public, is to go home.”

As a regular reminder of the danger he faces, Dodson always leaves a distinctive marking on any stopped vehicle when approaching the driver’s side. “If something happens to me and the driver takes off, there will be evidence that I pulled him over,” he said.

Asked about the risks and rewards of the job, Dodson said: “We have a great team and we look after each other. We don’t make a ton of money doing what we do. We do it because we want to.”

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'What's your emergency?'

Inside the Sheriff's Office nerve center

BY PATTY HARDEE
For Foothills Forum

Step into the vestibule of the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office and peer through the thick Plexiglas window into the department's nerve center: The dispatch office, a tiled floor space about the size of a bedroom.

Inside, 24 hours a day, seven days a week sit two employees before desk-to-ceiling arrays of computer screens. The dispatchers, civilian staff rather than sworn law enforcement officers, take emergency and other calls, monitor the whereabouts of deputies and fire and rescue personnel, and generally watch over the well-being of the county.

On the Saturday evening that this reporter observed the operation, Sheila Walter and Brandon Stroupe were just starting their 12-hour overnight shift. At shift changes (which occur at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.) there is a flurry of

activity as deputies signing off duty tell their reporting-for-duty colleagues of incidents that occurred earlier and situations that still need attention. There's also bantering, teasing and gossip-sharing — signs of camaraderie among sworn officers and the civilian dispatchers.

This evening, the staff still mourns the tragedy of the previous week when a Page County deputy was killed during a routine traffic stop. Stroupe posts a notice on the bulletin board of another death: Charles (Charlie) Hawkins, chief and longtime member of the Castleton Volunteer Fire Department. Stroupe honors the fallen chief by broadcasting the notice to deputies and fire and rescue companies.

Shortly after the shift change, things settle down. Stroupe and Walter enter information from traffic summons and criminal activity reports left by the deputies on the prior shift. "We do paperwork when we're not busy," says Stroupe, who is three months into his tenure as a Rappahannock County dispatcher. A nine-year veteran of the Luray Volunteer Fire and Rescue



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Dispatchers Sheila Walter and Brandon Stroupe during a 12-hour overnight shift.

Company, Stroupe also spent three years as a Page County Sheriff's Office dispatcher.

Walter, too, is an experienced emergency responder. A resident of Amissville, she worked as a full-time dispatcher at the RCSO from 1984 to 2014, when she retired. Later that year she came back as a part-timer. She also volunteers at the Amissville Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company.

The office is quiet this weekend night except for a few calls about a possible fire in the Flint Hill-Huntly area. When calls come in, computer screens at both desks show Google Earth images of the area where the calls are from, as well as the name, address and phone number of the caller. Walter takes one and asks if the caller is near the site of a controlled burn reported hours earlier. If so, she reassures the caller that the smoke is likely from that source. Residents burning brush and debris are asked to notify the Sheriff's Office as a courtesy. Computer screen icons show the locations of those burns.

Routine dispatch tasks include checking in with deputies. "We keep track of officers both on and off duty," says Walter, adding: "Their radios transmit signals." Stroupe notes that dispatchers also make status calls to officers every five minutes. "At midnight, we do roll call," he says.

"We're not very busy tonight," says Stroupe. "I like when it's quiet because it means no one's hurt or injured, and everybody's getting along. Sometimes I find it selfish when someone says 'I want to be busy.' It means that someone is hurt."

"When it's busy, the time goes by quicker," says Walter.

Stroupe adds, "Some people may not know how much [law enforcement personnel] care. They

only hear the bad things about law enforcement. I assure you, everyone in this department cares deeply about the community."

WHEN A CALL COMES IN

When a 911 call comes in, one of the dispatchers answers the phone with "what's your emergency?" They ask the caller's name and nature of the emergency, and log the information into a computer.

The second dispatcher sees the information in real time on another computer and sends the call to the fire or rescue company closest (or most available) to the reported emergency. A large screen in the center of the office's cluster of computers carries graphics telling the dispatchers the availability of companies and equipment in Rappahannock and surrounding counties.

Other phones and computer screens link the dispatchers to Virginia and federal crime databases. Within seconds, Stroupe and Walter can respond to a deputy's vehicle license tag check with the year, make, and model of the vehicle; tag expiration date; and if the owner has any outstanding arrest warrants. A master list, with data going back to 2002, keeps track of every call that comes into the office.

Stroupe says the office has the ability to rouse volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians through seven dedicated siren tones. Each tone signals a different fire and rescue company, so that volunteers of that company can know if they are needed. Dispatchers wear wireless phone sets, so even if they are away from the computers they can still respond to calls immediately.

"We're like everyone else," said Stroupe. "If we're not busy, we get drowsy, so we get up, walk around, maybe stand outside for some fresh air. But we are always connected."

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