

Chief Matthew Murray's Office

200 S 3rd Street | Yakima, WA 98901
Telephone: (509) 575-6211



September 6, 2022

Dear Yakima Community,

As your Chief of Police, I continually work to advance the relationship between the Yakima Police Department and the community. As in any relationship, open and honest communication is the hallmark of the trust the community bestows upon its police. I am writing this letter to discuss some current public safety issues in Yakima. As always, I invite your questions and comments... we work for you.

Crisis Response Unit (SWAT)

The Crisis Response Unit is comprised of the Crisis Negotiations Team and the Tactical Team, which is better known as SWAT.

The acronym "SWAT" refers to an expert police tactical team using Specialized Weapons And Tactics. The modern concept emerged in the Los Angeles Police Department to control riots and violent confrontations. In the ensuing sixty years, SWAT teams have been assigned the task of responding to high-threat situations (usually involving the threat or use of deadly force), which normal patrol officers are not as equipped or trained to resolve. And with the advent of active and mass shooters, we **need** people who are willing to step into the breach to save lives.

The City of Yakima has maintained a SWAT team since 1977 and it remains a competitive and prestigious assignment.

Unfortunately, many people see a SWAT deployment and immediately conjure up images of military units ready for battle. But that is not the purpose of YPD's SWAT team nor do its deployments validate this misperception.

Skeptical? Let's look at the numbers. Yakima patrol officers had to engage armed suspects with lethal force four times in the past fourteen months¹. In each of these recent incidents a suspect used or threatened officers with a firearm. However, the YPD SWAT team has not used lethal force in more than five years. This is despite responding to **seventy-seven** (77) high-risk incidents (typically involving armed criminal suspects). On numerous occasions, those suspects either fired at SWAT officers or pointed firearms at them – **with no return fire** from officers.

¹ None of the suspect's died as a result – largely due to the lifesaving medical efforts of those same officers immediately following these officer involved shootings

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This past Saturday (Labor Day Weekend), YPD attempted to arrest a domestic violence suspect. He fled into his house and immediately began threatening to shoot any officer who attempted to arrest him. Due to the level of threats and the suspect's known access to firearms, the SWAT team was called out to assist. Despite most members being off-duty for the holiday, some camping, some barbequing, some just getting much needed rest – they came. As they arrived in the ninety-degree heat, they jumped into the SWAT vehicle, donned their heavy uniforms and equipment, and took a position to address and contain the threat. All of them knowing that this type of situation is unpredictable and often takes many hours to resolve.

I responded to the command center and observed as the events unfolded. What I witnessed was humbling, and frankly, what compelled me to draft this missive.

EVERY decision or order was analyzed and debated before its issuance. The strategy of slowing things down, getting good cover, and maintaining a safe distance while containing the threat was obvious. The commitment to the sanctity of life was evident in every conversation. The genuine concern for safety, the discipline from hundreds of hours of training, and the professionalism demonstrated was profound. The incident commander (a lieutenant) and one of the seasoned SWAT team leaders (a sergeant) huddled, assessing the impact of any action and using it to predict the suspect's likely reaction to their next move (like deploying non-lethal gas or removing security bars from windows and doors). What they didn't do was complain about how hot it was, how long this was taking, nor make immediate plans to end the incident with force.

This was also true of the lead Crisis Negotiator. She had been in the command center from the start, working to make and keep communication with the suspect. Her highly-trained team in concert with the tactical team, calmly and professionally engaged with the suspect, and in some cases family, to peacefully resolve the incident. In this case, the suspect kept calling 911, being transferred to negotiators and then hanging up. When he stopped talking via phone, they recorded his grandmother pleading with him to surrender peacefully and played it to him over the loudspeaker. There was no hint of frustration, rather, a relentless effort to keep trying.

As this took place over several hours, the suspect continued to threaten officers with deadly force. He pointed guns (one with a laser sight) at officers and even fired a low-caliber gun at one point. The team stayed disciplined and ready – but **did not return fire**.

As evening turned to night, the suspect decided to surrender. He left the house with a handgun visible in his waistband. After following commands for several steps, he then turned around and started to take his hands off his head, his hands dropping down toward the gun in his waistband. He was firmly (but professionally) ordered to put his

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hands back on his head, but he did not comply. We were now seconds away from either a peaceful arrest or a lethal engagement. YPD K9 Zorro was deployed and engaged the suspect, likely saving his life. The suspect was later treated for minor bite injuries.

But allow me to rewind the clock three minutes or so to the moment the suspect decided to surrender. If you were with me in the command center, listening to each movement and directive, you would feel an immense tension. The incident commander's head bowed as he pressed the radio mic against his forehead – ready to issue orders if needed. The crisis negotiator, also bowing her head and barely audible, pled for the suspect to give up quietly and not be harmed. I also felt the tension, mentally willing the suspect to give up, for everyone to go home safe. The whole world shrunk to the voice commands of officers bleating out of the microphone monitoring it all.

And then came the magic words, "Suspect in custody".

"Thank God," the negotiator said as the commander loudly exhaled the breath he had been holding in.

It was over. Everyone, including the suspect, was safe.

I stepped out of the command center moments later, ready to resume my own holiday weekend. And I watched SWAT operators heading back to the command center with broad smiles and sending each other a silent "thumbs up" for a peaceful end.

And as I drove home I found myself thankful for these amazing men and women. For their patience, demeanor, devotion to training, and commitment to the sanctity of life. These are not thrill seekers – but peacekeepers. Anyone who sees their green tactical uniforms, armored vehicles, and slung rifles and thinks otherwise just doesn't know what I know or see what I saw. *I for one, would love twenty more just like them.*

Corrections

Many members of our community don't realize that YPD operates a jail. It is intended for low-level offenders of municipal ordinance violations. Most inmates spend less than a few days in jail, but some can get sentences up to two years.

This division, Corrections, is staffed by a commander, two sergeants, and eleven officers. They operate twenty-four hours a day and can house up to about eighty male inmates (we do not have the ability to house female inmates).

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This team is comprised of quiet professionals. There is very little drama, and frankly, is the best operating jail I have ever encountered (and trust me, jails are typically difficult to staff and manage).

In jail culture, when an inmate writes a request to the jail commander (or sergeants) it is called a "kite". They can be complaints, a request for certain privileges, or a request for information (like a release date). This morning, I came to work and read the following kite:

"I want you to know that your C.O.'s (Corrections Officers) are some of the nicest fairest & overall a pleasure compared to some of the C.O.'s I have been in contact with. Sounds funny coming from an inmate But If I Don't let you know you have good personelle (sic) then who will. They have a hard Job & Do it well even as I sit in here I still Recognize it".

Wow. What a great way to start the day.

The Mission Statement for the Yakima Police Department is to reduce violent crime while providing exceptional customer service. And that standard applies to all YPD employees. Hand it to Corrections, even the inmates recognize exceptional service.

Well done!

Traffic

In my last letter to the community (2-11-22) I discussed traffic problems in Yakima. Unfortunately, there is still a great opportunity for improvement here. To many people are blatantly disobeying traffic laws and others are getting injured or killed).

As of August 1, 2022, we had 12 traffic fatalities. That is the highest in Yakima history and we have a quarter of the year left. In 2021, 60% of the traffic fatalities involved impaired drivers and we made 335 DUI arrests. Last week we arrested one drunk driver after he crashed into a parked patrol car. Another officer was responding to that accident and arrested a second driver for DUI after he was nearly struck.

Due to temporarily low staffing levels, we were down to one detective in our Traffic Unit. I am now happy to report that we have added a second and expect a third traffic detective (who has been on long-term leave) to return soon. We continue to enforce traffic laws and have made 19,299 stops in the previous twelve months. As we continue to rebuild our staffing levels you can expect to see more traffic enforcement. We do not relish writing citations and more often than not issue warnings, but the culture of

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“anything goes on Yakima streets” must change. It is our intention to enhance our overall traffic enforcement for the foreseeable future.

I recognize that some will agree with my letter and others will not. I welcome both points of view and encourage people to communicate your thoughts to me. We work for you and your voice is relevant to how we operate in our shared community.

Warmest Regards,

Chief Matthew Murray

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