

TV shows give unrealistic view of police work, local officers say

By Eric Bottjer
Of the Emerald

The life of a Eugene police officer has little in common with the escapades of a television cop, says Sgt. Tim McCarthy, community service director for the Eugene Police Department. But because television is often the only perspective many have of law enforcement, a person's view of the police can be distorted, he says.

McCarthy calls this situation "distressing."

"Most cop shows on today are oatmeal," he says. "Television gives an inaccurate view on what it's like to be a police officer."

While a television police hero commonly uses force to apprehend suspects, McCarthy says it is rare for an officer to even display a weapon. The average police officer does not spend his or her time in gun battles with drug pushers or chasing thugs through alleys, he says. Instead, time is spent in briefings, cruising their beats or filing reports, he says.

This is especially true of a Eugene police officer, he says.

"We end up writing tickets for almost everything," McCarthy says. "It's just too expensive to book and jail everyone. The cost of putting a person in jail for the night is higher than putting them up at the Hilton."

The only way to comprehend the life of a police officer is to be one, McCarthy says. Even those who graduate from a police academy may have a distorted view of their future work, he says. Most officers who quit do so in their first year, usually after working their beats alone, he adds.

"It takes a long time to grasp the reality of your work," says patrolman Dennis Clark. A Eugene police officer since 1972, Clark says new officers are under added pressure from their peers to perform correctly.

The key to performance "is to feel right about what you're doing," Clark says.

"There are some people who aren't cut out for this line of work. This may sound corny, but the whole idea is to protect life and property," he says.

And life on duty is far from the glamorous image portrayed by Hollywood, Clark says.

"Almost 100 percent of your time is spent in a car. The car is my office, it's where I file reports," he says.

In addition to eight-hour shifts, police officers must appear in court, visit the Department of Motor Vehicles and work overtime. This has a negative effect on family life, Clark says. "There's no routine to it so you can't plan ahead."

Off-duty time is spent in a variety of ways. "A lot of people here have different lives and hobbies away from the force," Clark says. "I'm not saying it's bad for some cops to limit their friends to other cops. We have a good group of people here. I personally find it's mentally healthy to mix with a variety of people."

Officer April Norman, one of eight women on the force, says most police officers separate their personal and professional lives.

"It's important to have a personal life away from your business life. It's important to have a group of friends who aren't police officers," she says.

Norman started her law enforcement career in Idaho, where she became the first woman patrol officer on a small town police force. She says she encountered a lot of discrimination, both from her peers and the local public.

"I couldn't go to the grocery store without being stared at," she says.

Norman found a different situation in Eugene, where she has had little trouble gaining acceptance from fellow officers.

The Eugene public has a great amount of respect for the police, but many officers are unaware of it, McCarthy says.

"They're out there dealing with their bad apples. Most of the work is maintaining order, dealing with noise complaints or family disputes. When we show up during a domestic argument, nobody is glad to see us," McCarthy says.

"You have to forget a lot of this stuff," Clark says. "I don't take my work home with me."

Those who want to work for the Eugene Police Department go through a 10-week training course at the Board on Police Standards and Training in Monmouth, Oregon's sole police academy. A majority of their time is spent in classrooms, learning and repeating job details.

Graduates entering the EPD spend four to eight weeks patrolling with an experienced officer. An evaluation follows, and if deemed ready, the rookie officer will ride alone from then on.

Patrol officers spend their first 18 months in a probationary period, in which their performance is closely scrutinized.

"They can be fired for a variety of reasons, from inability to file reports to citizen complaints," McCarthy says.

Some officers, new and experienced, fall victim to job pressure, Clark says. Officers are able to seek help from a department support group formed about five years ago, he says.

A patrol officer's salary starts at \$1,300 a month and tops out at \$2,200. Promotions are rare because of budget cuts.

"When I started in 1971, cops were promoted just to keep people moving up," McCarthy says. "Now you're just waiting for people to die."

The EPD received 10 new recruits this year, their first since 1980.

"They (Eugene City Council members) finally realized the cutbacks had gone too far," McCarthy says. "We are unable to find any city with less cops per capita than Eugene." Eugene has 1.2 officers per 1,000 citizens.

The EPD currently employs 130 officers, McCarthy says.

Despite these statistics, McCarthy has a positive outlook. "We have good citizens here who respect their police force. Eugene is a good place to be a cop."

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