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“School Resource Officer”



Officer Dave Lichtenberg isn't a typical police officer. He wears a polo shirt, and in his office at the Norfolk Junior High he has four guitars, Mustang model cars and pictures of Harley Davidson motorcycles. He takes time to chat with kids in the hallway or lunchroom instead of standing menacingly over them. He is a typical police officer, though, in that he carries a gun and wears a police badge and the kids know he's there to help them if needed.

Lichtenberg is on staff fulltime as a school resource officer through an agreement between the City of Norfolk and the Norfolk Public Schools.

As part of his seven years on the job, he has made it his goal to know and understand the kids at the school- who their friends are, how their family life may be influencing their behavior and how they can be directed to positive behavior.

“I establish relationships with as many kids as I can. At this age, the majority are going to have speed bumps. My job is to help them be successful,” Lichtenberg said.

Although he is a certified police officer, Lichtenberg said a lot of what he does falls under the job description of a social worker or counselor.

“My duty as a police officer is to enforce city ordinances and state statutes. As a resource officer I'd rather be proactive and keep kids out of the legal system. In the seventh and eighth grade, you have a lot of drama and hormones. There may be less than 5% who need enforcement. You're amazed when you know the backgrounds of some of these kids and you wonder how they even get to school,” Lichtenberg said.

One day is never the same as the next. Lichtenberg may need to pick up a truant kid at home and gave him a ride to school. Recently, he directed help for a student who thought she might be pregnant. Last week he followed up on a stolen bike case at the school, took information from a NJHS staff member about concerns for a student that

was allegedly assaulted by a family member, and investigated reports that another student's basic needs were not being met. There are also mental health issues which Lichtenberg said is an increasing problem.

"Kids are always kids. If I have to write them a ticket on campus or at the mall, the next day I'll ask them how they're doing. I can be their best friend or their worst enemy but I'm not going to let them continue to fail," Lichtenberg said.

During the course of the year, Lichtenberg will talk to civics classes about search and seizure and other issues of the law. He also occasionally works with students at the Norfolk Senior High and Middle School. Principals, teachers, guidance counselors and parents are all kept informed and work together to help the student.

"Everyone's in the loop. Everyone's on the same page. I may be working with a diversion officer or a probation or parole officer. Some of the greatest success stories have been when a kid this age was arrested, put into the system and changed his life because of a joint effort to help him," Lichtenberg said.

As an in-house investigator, Lichtenberg has worked with assaults, disorderly conducts, probation violations, thefts, possession of a controlled substance, missing juvenile - runaway, uncontrollable juvenile, weapon violations, criminal mischief, terroristic threats, child pornography, arson and even a few traffic accidents around the school. His office at the school is a mini police station as he is able to access the Police Department files, all school files and security cameras from his desk. He also works hard to let kids know that school is a gang free zone.

"We've seen dramatic declines in the interest kids have in joining gangs. We know what street names they use so we can try and stop it before it starts. I want students to realize that there will be consequences for choosing that type of life style and that they will be held accountable for their actions," Lichtenberg said.

Norfolk Junior High principal Mike Hart is enthusiastic about the work Lichtenberg does in the school.

"Dave helps build up our kids. He knows all the kids at the junior high and high school and knows their families so he's able to be a lot more effective. Kids and parents trust him because they know they'll be treated right and with respect," Hart said.

Hart said that adding a resource officer to the school was first met with some community trepidation. Why does a school need a fulltime police officer? Now, he said, people are appreciative of the work Lichtenberg does and consider him part of the school.

"Our district is lucky to have Dave. He's a great fit. The disciplinary measures we take here are not punitive. They're restorative. We're not going to give up on anyone," Hart said.

The school resource program was first started in the 1975-76 school year with grant money that placed two officers that served all the schools- K through 12.

Then, in 2004-2005 a federal grant paid the salary of a police officer so that Lichtenberg could work fulltime at the schools. When that grant expired, the school and City of Norfolk agreed to fund a resource officer. This contract expires at the end of the 2010/2011 school year.

"I went to college to become a teacher and came out as a police officer. It's kind of funny that after 26 plus years as an officer that I'm back with the kids doing what I like most, trying to make a positive difference in their lives. This is a team effort by the staff at the NJHS. I tell parents that their children are safe at the NJHS and that they will always get our best effort to meet their child's needs," Lichtenberg said.

Lichtenberg and his wife, Donna, have 3 children, Whitney, Jesse and Kyle, who is a senior at Norfolk High School. The Lichtenbergs also have two grandchildren, Treven and Harper.