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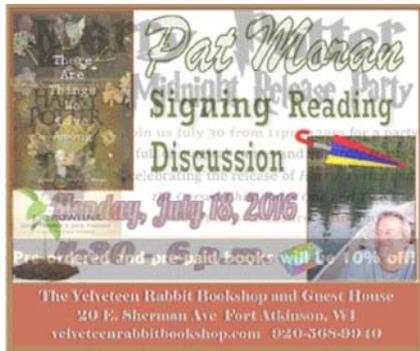
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Posted: Friday, July 15, 2016 9:40 am | Updated: 9:42 am, Mon Jul 18, 2016.

By Ryan Whisner rwhisner@dailyunion.com

(Editor's note: The events of recent weeks have refocused attention on the actions of police officers, one of so many divisive issues in this contentious election year. This two-part series offers the views of Jefferson County law enforcement officials on the importance of community and police working together. Today's story focuses on area municipalities and their push toward community policing.)

As Americans struggle with the deaths of black men in encounters with police across the country, and now the subsequent killing of five Dallas officers, the actions of law enforcement are under the microscope.



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Police agencies across the U.S. remain on edge and on guard after receiving threats and calls for violence against them on social media in the aftermath of the recent incidents.

However, law enforcement departments in Fort Atkinson, Jefferson, Whitewater and other area communities have not seen the negativity being reported elsewhere. Jefferson Police Chief Ken Pileggi and Fort Atkinson Police Chief Adrian Bump each said that if anything, they have experienced more — not less — community support in the aftermath of the Dallas tragedy.

Both said none of their officers have received negative feedback personally following the fatal shootings of the black men by white officers nationwide and five Dallas officers.

The two area chiefs are big proponents of getting their officers more involved in the community, and the support from residents seems to show that is happening.

"One thing I've noticed since the five officers were killed in Dallas were how many people were coming here or saying things on Facebook that are appreciative for us and letting us know they support us," Bump said.

During the past week, the chief said, every day someone has brought coffee, doughnuts, cookies or muffins to the police station. One couple brought in a potted plant that has been placed outside the rear entrance so all the officers coming into work can see it.

"I think this city is awesome when it comes to how they support the police department and the things that we do," Bump said. "Every time we do something, we get really good feedback and people appreciate the things that we do."

He pointed out that since coming to Fort Atkinson, one constant he has felt has been "community."

"I have never worked in a community that shows so much support for its public servants as Fort Atkinson," Bump said. "It is amazing. I am literally amazed at how consistently and continuously you think of us and how often you provide symbols of thanks and appreciation."



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The Fort Atkinson chief said he never has worked somewhere where so many people remember the police and fire departments on Thanksgiving, Christmas, times of tragedy or for no reason at all, bringing in treats or cards or just thank-yous on email or social media.

"Although there is a lot of negativity going on in the media right now across the country, it almost seems like in our city right here, it increases the number of people who are willing to take a couple of minutes to let us know they appreciate us," Bump said.

Chief Pileggi agreed. While Jefferson's officers have been advised to be hyper-vigilant, there has been no indication of negative behavior toward them.

Like Bump, he said that in the aftermath of the Dallas massacre, there has been a lot of support coming from the community.

Pileggi said the department has worked hard to establish strong community relations with all residents and has found during his two years in Jefferson that they are very supportive.

"That is why it is so important to me that we have a really strong police-community partnership," Pileggi said. "Without the community's support, a police department will not be successful. We've got to be involved. We've got to reflect our community and we've got to remember we've got to help each other out."

The chief feels he is fortunate to work in Jefferson.

"It is a wonderful community that gives us great support, especially in these really trying times. I hope it continues and I hope there is some kind of peace that comes," Pileggi said.

"We look at all people as human souls and the officers are trained to be colorblind and to deal with a human being as a human being," he said.

Pileggi said that is exactly what they do acting as professional police officers.

"Police officers, you recruit from the human race, you try and do the best you can with psychological background investigations and everything else," the chief said. "Individuals are individuals, sometimes they act inappropriately but you hold them accountable."

"I would never tolerate any racism or bigotry," Pileggi said. "It would be dealt with swiftly and harshly."

He said such actions are against the core values as an officer being open and inclusive, understanding and nonjudgmental.

The Jefferson chief noted that one of the core tenants for police officers is restraint.

"They will use the amount of force required to get a situation under control," he said. "They will de-escalate and if there was a forceful action taken, they will do what is called 'follow-through considerations' or they will actually render aid as much as possible."

Bump added that since being hired as chief in September 2014, he, too, has heard no complaints of biased policing in Fort Atkinson.

"I'm very impressed with our officers' ability to deal with people of all different protected classes," he said. "I think our officers communicate really well from just being able to communicate with people, to show empathy and to deal with people in crisis in a manner that aligns with expectations and training."

The chief said he feels the Fort Atkinson officers are really well-rounded to handle various concerns, focusing on problemsolving more than the person with whom they are dealing.

"They are not treating the person; they are treating the problem," he said. "I think that is one thing we have going for us that makes us a really good police department that is able to solve problems."

The two chiefs appeared to agree that recent media coverage of police-related shootings has made it more challenging for police officers to do their job.

"The beautiful thing about the United States is that we have that wonderful document — the U.S. Constitution — that allows people to have the freedom to voice their opposition or protest, as long as its done legally and peacefully," Pileggi said.

He noted that as a law enforcement officer, it is the generalizations made by protesters that hurt the most.

"The thing that drives me crazy is you are painted with a broad brush," he said.

As an example, he cited the deaths of the officers in Dallas and some of the stories that came out in the aftermath. Pileggi pointed out that some of the officers were shot in the back protecting protestors who were gathering peacefully.

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Pileggi said he read one story of a woman who saw two officers shot as they ran to shield her and her son, who were there to protest against the police force.

The chief acknowledged that with some legislation related to officer-involved deaths requiring outside investigators to become involved, it takes time for incidents to be resolved.

"Officers are held to a very high standard, which they should be, and they are accountable," he said. "A lot of times in our society, people want an answer and they want it now, without getting the facts first."

Pileggi said that is difficult to deal with for both officers and administrators.

"You have to be so careful what you say if you don't know the facts," he said. "If you don't have the facts, there are those people that were not on the scene and they'll make them up and fill in the blanks, and that can become extremely corrosive and very harmful, especially when it is later proven that wasn't, in fact, what happened and the use of force was appropriate."

Pileggi noted that based on his understanding, there are approximately 53 million law enforcement contacts per day.

"Yes, some of them are violent, officers are assaulted, some of them are killed," he said. "No police officer goes to work in the morning saying, 'oh boy, I want to shoot somebody today.'"

Being involved in law enforcement for more than 30 years, Pileggi said that most officers have hearts of gold.

"People go into this profession because they love people," the chief said. "They encounter people at their worst crisis times and try to actually help out. Inherently, the equipment we carry and what we do (policing) unfortunately can be a violent encounter. We train our officers very well."

Pileggi noted that there are greater societal problems — poverty and drug use, unemployment and underemployment, socio-economic gaps — that cannot be corrected by police action.

Continuing, he pointed out that by the nature of their role, officers deal with people in crisis.

"A lot of times that can be the only time they interact with a police officer and you want that to be as positive as you can," he said.

However, the chief acknowledged that sometimes policing can become violent as officers deal with individuals who mean to harm other citizens or, at times, the police officers.

"You have to answer force with force and that is a difficult situation to be put into," Pileggi said. "The vast majority of police officers throughout this country are absolutely decent-hearted human beings doing the right things in very dangerous situations. I always like to remind the public that, when people are in crisis or when there is a violent encounter happening, most people run away from it while police officers bravely run toward it."

The Jefferson chief said he likes to believe that people still look up to law enforcement as a very noble and rewarding profession.

"I always equate them to knights of the old days," Pileggi said, noting that is why the squad cars in Jefferson refer to the officers as Jefferson's guardians.

"That is what they do. They are out there every day guarding and protecting people, and that is what they are supposed to be doing and I would expect nothing less of myself or any of my officers," he said.

Bump noted that the safest cities are those where the community also understands its role in safety and security.

"As a team and as a department, the City of Fort Atkinson Police Department's mission is to professionally and effectively work in partnership with the community to protect life, property and order," he said.

Bump said it is very common for citizens to view the police as a shadowy figure driving by in a squad car.

"However, I want people to know who our officers are and I want our officers to know who our people are, or at least what's important to the people in the community. The only way to do that is to be involved," the Fort Atkinson police chief explained.

He said he has struggled the past few days trying to figure out how to effectively thank the public for being so supportive.

"We are proud to serve this city, just based on how positive people are toward us," the chief said.

"Our officers are happy to work here and are proud to work here. Thank you for making this community such a great and rewarding place to serve."

Monday: Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Jeff Parker's views.

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