

## Behind the badge

### A ride-along with Waukesha police helping the homeless

By Karen Pilarski

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WAUKESHA — Forget what movies and television portray about a typical day for a police officer. The job is rarely filled with gunfire or bravado and is far removed from the larger-than-life characters often depicted on screen.

The Freeman accompanied a Waukesha police officer on a short ride-along on Thursday to learn more about the department's interactions with the city's homeless population.

January weather is often unpredictable, but conditions resembled a return to polar vortex-like cold. The Police Department remains focused on locating those in need and making sure they are aware of available resources and know help is available.

Officer Jack Daily, who escorted The Freeman, said you never know when something is going to happen.

With homeless individuals, Daily stressed the Waukesha Police Department is not there to harass them.

“A lot of times, we're responding to someone else calling 911 on them, because they don't look OK. They shouldn't be in this building. They're in a stairwell. And every single time we go to them, we offer them the whole gamut of resources,” he said.

There was a call to check on someone at a laundromat but another officer followed up on it.

“All we're going to really do is offer help, he's

not in trouble. We're checking on him. We don't want people being miserable. We don't want people to be sick and injured. We want people to have the resources. We want them to get better. We want them to have employment. We want them to have housing, like we as a community,” Daily said.

Daily said the Police Department wants everyone to succeed and takes things interaction by interaction.

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Waukesha police officer Jack Daily took The Freeman on a ride-along on Thursday to learn more about the department's approach and interactions with the city's homeless population. Here, Daily looks at materials on the ground to board up a busted-out window at the South Street parking ramp.

Karen Pilarski/Freeman Staff

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Police

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**'I want to offer people help'**

“When I have an interaction with somebody, I want them to be better because of it, I don’t like citing people. I don’t like arresting. I want to offer people help. I got into this job to be a community help, you know? A lot of them seem to decline the resources, but just because they’ve declined it once, doesn’t mean I’m not going to stop offering right now,” he said.

Daily drove by the Hope Center, which offers a day shelter, food and other resources. There were a couple of guys taking a cigarette break outside. A woman in the parking lot was pulling a wagon full of items. Officers often tell people about 211, a free and confidential service that connects people with thousands of local programs and services such as the Hope Center.

“I found two people that were at a bus station near the hospital, and they had walked from another municipality. They were exhausted, and I said we can take you either to the hospital or the Hope Center. They didn’t want to go to the hospital, so we took them to the Hope Center,” he said.

The Police Department leans on community partners such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Department of Health & Human Services, Salvation Army, 211, Hope Center, Hebron Housing, and others to provide homeless people with resources — shelter or housing, food, clothing — to help get them back on their feet.

People often associate police with arrests or citations, but when homelessness is part of the equation, interactions can be more complex. In many cases, though not all, mental illness may be involved, and past negative experiences can contribute to a bad opinion of law enforcement.

Daily said he did a walkthrough of the Hope Center and went to each table, saying hello to people eating a meal. The interaction is not to find out what they are doing, but to gain trust and some humanity. After getting up to leave, a woman came up to him in tears. She had just lost her mom and was behind on rent. She was having suicidal thoughts. He asked her if she would like to go to the hospital and was able to get her help.

Police respond to quality-of-life issues. A lot of times there will be homeless people who haven’t moved in hours and people will call police.

“We check and wake them up. They’re like, ‘Yeah, I’m fine. I just have nothing to do, nowhere to go.’ That’s when we start going down the resources. ‘Have you thought of this, can we follow up with you,’” he said.

For someone refusing resources, police always want to go the least restrictive path. The person is making a choice that is dangerous, especially in severely cold weather.

“You shouldn’t be standing in your socks in the snow without a jacket on and telling the cops you’re good. You’re clearly not making a good decision right now,” he said.

Police get Waukesha County Health and Human Services and the Crisis Unit involved in those cases.

### **Finding trust**

Daily stopped at the Waukesha Public Library, a place people go for warmth, books and computer access. As long as people are not causing a problem, police don’t interfere. In the back of the library, wedged in a corner desk, was a disheveled man with missing teeth.

“Hey man, you good?” Daily asked him.

The man rattled off something about not having a mailman. Daily said he wasn’t in trouble and didn’t mean to sound rude, but asked if he had a home, then if he noticed others hanging out in the library.

“I went to the Hope Center, but I don’t know where everyone is right now,” the man said.

Daily shook his hand and repeated his name to him.

Another person had bags of belongings around a desk.

“I have a question for you, like you’re not in trouble or anything. I’ll walk away too, if you want that. My name is officer Daily with the Waukesha Police Department. I’m just offering people resources. I notice you have your whole cart of stuff. Are you dealing with homelessness right now?” Daily said.

The person said they have been dealing with homelessness for a year and a half and declined Daily’s offer for resources.

Being homeless is not a crime, and the interactions try to change that mindset.

“I have to break the stigma that I’m not here to arrest you,” Daily said.

The next stop was the Salvation Army in Waukesha, which offers resources and shelter to men. Off to the side of the parking lot, someone had left their bags and other items. The Salvation Army has strict rules for residents, including no alcohol or drugs.

Lisa Ready, shelter advocate, was behind the desk checking people in. Visitors must empty their pockets and bags.

“We are constantly looking for drugs, paraphernalia, alcohol or anything like that,” Ready said.

They normally don’t have issues as people understand the rules. During intake, she goes through the rules, and if people are found with drugs or alcohol, they are discharged.

Inside the Salvation Army, a few men were chatting in a room with tables. Daily walked in and said hi. At first, they appeared standoffish. As they began engaging, he said it’s all about breaking down walls of communication and finding trust.

Daily recalled talking to a gunman who refused to leave a home by talking about the band Linkin Park.

“He had already pistol-whipped a lady and I noticed his shirt. I told him I like that kind of music too. We were riffing our songs of choice and asked if he could just come out of the house,” Daily said.

Back at the Salvation Army, he noted those men wouldn’t have given him the time of day had he not gained their trust.

Daily drove the squad car to the South Street parking ramp. Once inside, he noted tire tracks likely from another patrol car. During patrols, he walks from the top floor to the bottom to check things out. The roof is secluded, with a faint smell of urine and marijuana. Often there will be sleeping bags or discarded items like alcohol bottles and marijuana.

On Thursday morning, no one was around, but Daily was ready to enforce the rules and offer resources.



Waukesha police officer Jack Daily does a check on the Waukesha Public Library, including making sure resources are communicated to homeless individuals. The Freeman accompanied the officer on a short ride-along on Thursday to learn more about the department’s interactions with the city’s homeless population.

Karen Pilarski/Freeman Staff



Tiffany Denson, house manager of the Juno House, speaks with Waukesha police officer Jack Daily on Thursday during a check-in during his patrol.

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