

Name of Agency: Virginia Commonwealth University Police Department

Name of Chief: Chief John A. Venuti

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Institution type: Four-year, public university

Type of Agency: Sworn

Armed: Yes

Staff: Officers—92

Civilians—82

Students—188

Total—362



The Virginia Commonwealth University Police Department is the largest campus law enforcement in the Commonwealth of Virginia. With 92 fulltime sworn officers, more than 200 security personnel, and an on-campus dispatch center, VCU Police advances an “all-out community policing” philosophy where all activities and actions are performed with maximum effort and determination. Because VCU is located in an urban environment in the heart of Richmond, Virginia, the department faces unique challenges and practices a unique style of community policing that utilizes municipal-style organization and tactics.

VCU Police is working to establish itself as an up-and-coming national leader in innovation, problem solving and creativity in campus law enforcement and community policing on a college campus. The department serves a community of approximately 50,000 students, faculty and staff across two campuses, including a Level-1 trauma center and health system, in downtown Richmond, Virginia. Jurisdiction includes the core campuses and additional territory in the city of Richmond where many students, staff and faculty reside. The urban campus blends seamlessly into the rest of the city with university property, public parks, private residences, and commercial establishments all located within the core campus geography. The department includes a robust patrol division, an investigations

division, special operations unit, and specialty positions such as a sworn victim/witness specialist and a full-time civilian public information officer. The department's civilian security officers are primarily responsible for academic and residential security on both campuses.

When Chief John Venuti took the helm of the department in 2010, he instituted an array of ongoing reforms to raise the capabilities and professionalism of the department while integrating his officers into the fabric of the community. The department now conducts a biannual "perception of safety" survey which helps guide the department's priorities and provides indispensable feedback on the department's effectiveness. The most recent survey reported that an impressive 94.6% of the students, faculty and staff of VCU feel "safe" or "very safe" on campus.

### **Community Engagement, Community Policing**

VCU Police never misses an opportunity to inform, educate or involve members of the community. In the past year the department has pursued an unprecedented level of community engagement. Officers participate in fundraisers for charities, partner with Greek and other student organizations for educational or charitable activities, and are a highly visible presence in the daily lives of the VCU community. Engagement efforts run the gamut from attendance at neighborhood association meetings to an officer's weekly heavy metal show on the campus radio station.

As part of the career development program instituted by Chief Venuti, officers seeking advancement within the department are required to meet certain fitness standards as well as develop and execute a community outreach project to engage the VCU community and raise the reputation of the department. One of the more ambitious projects was a silent run from campus to the Virginia War Memorial for Memorial Day. The event drew more than 200 participants from age five to 75 in its inaugural year.



The department constantly looks for ways to educate the community on good safety habits and behaviors with reduced crime being the natural result of this community policing. The department also enjoys the strong support of the university administration, as displayed during a recent "U- Lock Exchange" event on campus. The department partnered with the university's Department of Student Affairs to provide 300 U-locks which students received in exchange for their old, insufficient cable locks. This modest investment of time and money will save



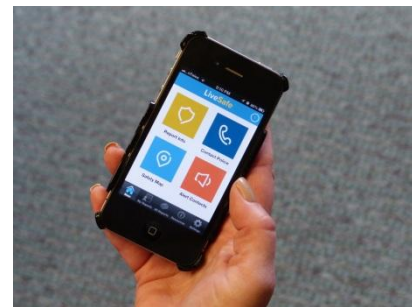
money and manpower by preventing hundreds of potential bike larcenies and spreading the word about good larceny prevention tactics.

The department has jumped into social media with both feet, with a full-time public information officer generating content for and managing several social media channels, primarily Facebook and Twitter. The department's social media channels now reach more than 6,000 people with original photos, videos and safety messages designed to inform and educate the community on ways to keep themselves safe, as well as the activities and accomplishments of the department.

Officer Greg Felton has been designated as the department's external relations officer, working with residents in neighborhoods surrounding campus to ensure a good relationship and ease the traditional "town and gown" tension that challenges all schools. Felton attends regular meetings of neighborhood associations and serves as a liaison between the community and school, as well as the community and problematic tenants or landlords. These efforts have created a safer and healthier living and working environment for both students and residents.

### **Embracing technology**

VCU Police is constantly looking for ways to connect with and engage the young demographic it serves. As Chief Venuti often tells students: "We don't care how you talk with us, as long as you're talking with us." In order to open yet another channel of communication that will appeal to young people, the department brought the LiveSafe app to campus this semester. With several thousand downloads in just a few weeks of operation and numerous valuable tips, questions, compliments, and suggestions, the program is off to a strong start.



The department has also stepped up its use of video and audio monitoring of activities on campus and activities of its officers. The university committed to an important upgrade of its outdated video surveillance system, giving investigators a powerful tool in solving crimes and serving as a deterrent against crime on campus. In-car cameras and officer body microphones are also valuable tools in investigating crime and creating a record of interactions with the public.

### **Expanding the size and quality of the force**

In 2012, VCU Police was approved by the university to expand its force by ten officers to its current level of 92 sworn, full time officers. VCU Police is the only campus law enforcement agency in the Commonwealth of Virginia to operate its own state-certified criminal justice academy. The department is about to begin training for its 39<sup>th</sup> basic academy class. Police instructors conduct a 25-week academy to prepare their officers, and officers from partner agencies across the region, to serve as police officers. The curriculum is specifically tailored to the unique challenges of policing in VCU's urban environment.





The department also conducts on going in-service and specialty training such as bike school, physical fitness training and testing, crowd management training, and active shooter training. Officers from VCU Police and surrounding agencies receive ongoing education on and around the campus from VCU Police instructors.



An emphasis on conduct and professionalism has resulted in consistently positive interactions with the community. In the past academic year, use of force incidents decreased by 32% and complaints against officers were reduced by 41%.

### **Strengthening relationships with colleagues**

Chief Venuti has built strong relationships with partner agencies, leading to improved safety and mutual benefit for each department. The VCU Police works closely and frequently with the Richmond Police Department to prevent and respond to crime on and around the VCU campuses, particularly in areas of concurrent jurisdiction. The agencies frequently partner during investigations or patrol initiatives, such as last summer's Carver Neighborhood Joint Patrol where one officer from each department



conducted joint evening patrols in a challenging neighborhood near VCU's main campus. The department also enlisted the help of the Virginia State Police who agreed to divert their interstate patrol routes through campus for the first few weeks of school when the community most wanted to notice a visible police presence.

Virginia is home to numerous innovative campus law enforcement agencies at 15 public four-year institutions, a public junior college, 23 public community colleges, and more than 300 non-public institutions. In order to ensure all departments had access to each other's best practices and successful initiatives, the VCU Police Department recently hosted the Commonwealth's first-ever Campus Community Policing Conference. Officers and leadership from agencies across the state gathered on VCU's campus for a day-long conference to share their experiences, learn from one another, and network with their colleagues.



For two weeks in October, the department is participating in an officer exchange program with colleagues at Virginia Tech. The two departments' campuses and demands are extremely different, but the goals are very much the same. Both departments expect to benefit greatly from this exposure to an environment very different from the one they patrol on a daily basis.

### **Recognition and Honors**

The VCU Police Department has undergone a series of rapid changes in recent years resulting in a more professional, well-organized force that serves a community which feels increasingly safe under their watch. The department's efforts have been honored in numerous ways in recent years including its first Governor's Transportation Safety Award, a second place finish in the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police Law Enforcement Challenge, and a MADD Law Enforcement Award to an officer for his work to combat DUI in jurisdiction.