

THE VILLAGE OF WALTON

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NEW YORK STATE

**POLICE REFORM AND REINVENTION
COLLABORATIVE PLAN**

METHOD

With an eye to the conflicts and issues concerning police departments occurring in the country Governor Cuomo signed Executive Order #203 requiring each local government to adopt a policing reform plan by April 1, 2021. With the pandemic in mind and to assure maximum community access the village of Walton created a blind survey requesting feedback regarding our police policies, activities, effectiveness and recommendations for change. The survey was distributed by mail to every residence with water and or sewer service, posted for download on the village website and available for pick up at the village office. To insure free speaking without fear of recrimination all surveys were returned anonymously to a drop box outside the village office. The returned surveys were and continue to be available for review by any interested individual at the village office.

Of the 1241 surveys sent out and an unknown number downloaded 120 were returned by the 19th of February. The responses were then tabulated and evaluated as to either favorable (positive) or unfavorable (negative) toward present village police policies, practices and activity. Additionally all written comments were summarized and included as a separate reference. The results and comments may be found in the appendix of this document.

On the 14th of March a committee consisting of representatives from the Walton Chamber of Commerce, the Walton Ministerial Association, Walton Central School, the Walton Police, and Walton Village Board met in a publicly available Zoom meeting to discuss the survey results and make recommendations for possible changes to police policies and procedures. Consideration was placed on the areas of Community Satisfaction, Safety, Perceived or Actual Unsuitable Performance, Community Involvement.

In reading this report, one should be mindful that the Village of Walton is not representative of the locations that were the stimulus for this action and may require unique approaches for effective law enforcement and other emergency services. Officers employed by the village often are required to respond and react to situations that may not be covered in their specific training.

Walton is a small village of 3,000 in an area encompassing 1.6 miles. This results in a population density of 1948 per square mile which is five times greater than the New York State average and ten times greater than the surrounding Town of Walton. Fire and EMS services are provided by fire district volunteers and the nearest police assistance is 20 minutes away. The Village police are usually first on the scene of all types of emergencies.

The Walton population is older, poorer, and more Caucasian (97%) than average. There are three agencies providing services for persons with special needs located in the Village. They are The ARC of Delaware County, Broom Developmental Services and Rehabilitation Support Services. Each provides housing, social skills, independent living skills and job training for clients of all ages with limited to profound disabilities.

Also, Walton is fortunate to be the location of Delaware Valley Hospital, the Delaware County Behavioral Health Facility, and a Bassett Health Care clinic. However, as have many small rural villages, Walton finds the tax base has eroded with the loss of industry and local merchants, placing more burden on the residential tax payers who may need more services but cannot afford them nor afford to leave. This does not absolve us from the need to provide the best services possible, but will require careful allocation of resources to accomplish our goal.

ANAYLISIS OF THE SURVEY

Satisfaction with service:

The majority of responses to the first question on the survey were in fact positive yet it was the one garnering the greatest number of negative responses. Given the current events in American society and the strong conservatism in this area it was to be expected there would be more support for than against the police. Looking at the comments there are multiple examples of hire more officers and praise and encouragement but only two that directly suggest any officers be removed. Still even including suggestions that there needs to be better enforcement of drug laws, speeding, and some individual peeves a near 10% dissatisfaction needs to be addressed.

Safety:

As found in question #1 there are a significant number of negative responses to question #4 with only one identifiable comment about a failure to respond to a complaint. The village has never been a place where people worried about their safety on the streets or at home. Thus it is surprising that there are so many negative returns. Again the level of dissatisfaction while unexplained needs to be addressed.

Perceived or actual inappropriate actions:

Again in response to question #2 (officer bias) the response is very much positive but there are several negative without any connecting comments.

Question #3 (use of excessive force or intimidation) The response is 90%

positive with a few negative that lack any relative comments.

Community involvement:

Are our officers approachable? It would appear this is our strongest point. Well over 90% of the respondents indicate they would feel comfortable walking up to our officers and having a conversation or perhaps just exchanging hellos. There is not a better starting point for bringing the community and the police together to establish a good working relationship.

Public suggestions for improvement:

The final request was for public comment in a forum that can not be duplicated in either an open meeting nor a zoom conference. Everyone was encouraged to air their thoughts without direction or fear of interruption nor recrimination from anyone. It provided a much broader insight to what the community sees as the means to improve the relationship of the Walton Police Department with the people they serve.

Summary:

The committee concluded that the responses to the directed questions were primarily favorable yet indicated there is room for improvement. The comments provided a much more comprehensive pathway to needed changes and reform.

RECOMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE

To address the concerns and issues identified by the community and through the review of the Walton Village Police Department (WVPD), the Police Reform Committee makes the following recommendations:

- It is recommend that WVPD take steps to improve visibility and transparency. To accomplish this the WVPD should:
 - Improve the visibility of the patrol vehicle.
 - Increase foot patrols and encourage more out of vehicle interaction with the community.
 - Be as open and transparent as possible and legally permissible.
 - Introduce officers through available media and attendance at public gatherings.
 - Continue to develop relationships and partnerships in the community.
- It is recommend that the WVPD review and update the department's policy and procedures manual keeping the department's policies current and the village

protected from liability.

- Within six months the department should have reviewed and implemented updates to policies and procedures addressing all of the critical standards identified in the NYS Accreditation Manual.
 - Updates should be reviewed and implemented on an annual basis.
 - Explore pursuing state accreditation.
- It is recommended that the WVPD develop and publish a website for the WVPD with the following content.
 - An overview of the police department, including location, area covered by the department, introduction to staff, and services provided.
 - Access to forms
 - Officer accomplishments and training.
 - Calendar.
 - Public service announcements.
 - Tip line.
 - Sex offender information
 - Linkage to other service agencies (such as dog warden, code enforcement, etc)
 - It is recommended that the Village of Walton improve signage to make it easier to find the WVPD station.
 - It is recommended that the WVPD set minimum in-service training requirements for police department staff including content, minimum hours per year, etc. Include regular training in use of force, defensive tactics, community interaction and bias awareness, cultural competencies, de-escalation tactics, mental health and legal issues.
 - It is recommended the village police committee, in collaboration with the Police Chief be tasked with implementing and monitoring these recommendations, once approved by the board.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

A vital element of the review and reform process is monitoring and measuring the impact the recommendations of this panel makes in the future. This can be accomplished in several ways and should be a continuing part of WVPD's operation.

Monitoring traffic on the police department's webpage, engaging the community on social media platforms, soliciting feedback and partnerships in the community is essential in measuring the impact and effectiveness of the plan outlined above. The process of working in collaboration must continue after this initial plan is accepted and put into play.

Conclusion

The Police Reform plan process clearly shows our community pride and overall satisfaction with the work that our Village of Walton Police Department is doing. The community surveys indicated the following areas of concern; visibility, transparency and community police officer connections. The committee believes the recommendations made will greatly improve the relationship and we can all live, work and safely thrive in our beautiful village.

Thank you to every resident of the Village of Walton who provided feedback to assist in the developing this plan

Respectfully

Village of Walton, Police Reform Committee

