



Mount Vernon Police Department Frequently Asked Questions

Commonly asked questions about the Mount Vernon Police Department's policies and practices

Cultural Diversity

Q: What's the department's position for engaging the diversity of cultures within the community?

A: Our community is in a state of perpetual cultural change and we must stay attuned to it. The single most important trait for us to possess is social intelligence – the ability to appreciate and interact effectively with people of all ethnic, racial, economic and religious backgrounds. We cannot let the traditions of our profession isolate us from building a safer and more inclusive community. We work hard to guard against having our actions and words misinterpreted by people of different cultures or means. Judging people by the group validates suspicions that police do not serve all citizens fairly, equally and without prejudice. We believe the words expressed are reflected in our hiring practices, training, strategic priorities, operations, programs and accountability systems.

The Mount Vernon Police Department believes it must involve the community in the delivery of its service. It is clear that the Department cannot be successful in achieving its mission without the support and involvement of the people it serves. Crime is not only a police problem and it should not be considered as such. Rather, crime must be responded to as a community problem. Therefore, it is important for the Department to involve the community in its operations. This sharing of responsibility involves providing a way for the community to join forces with the Department; both in the identification of neighborhood problems and determining the most appropriate strategies for resolving them. It is counter-productive for the Department to isolate itself from the community and not allow citizens the opportunity to work with it.

The Mount Vernon Police Department believes it must be accountable to the community it serves. The Police Department is not an entity unto itself. It is a part of government, and exists only for the purpose of serving the public to which it must be accountable. An important element of accountability is openness. Secrecy in police work is not only undesirable, but unwarranted. Accountability also means being responsive to the problems and needs of our citizens. Accountability means managing our police resources in the most cost-effective manner. It must be remembered that the power to police comes from the consent of those being policed.

Finally, it is paramount that societal ideals underlying the Department purpose and mission be institutionalized in the minds of all members. We must ensure that although community leaders and interests change with time, ideals remain our driving force.

Use of Force

Q: What is the Mount Vernon Police Department's position on using force?

A: Police use of force is an important and highly visible issue in our society. It is important because it involves community trust and confidence in our practices and community support is essential to effective policing in a democratic society. It doesn't matter if it is Minneapolis or Mount Vernon, WA, no action on the part of a police officer can have more far reaching consequences for the officer, department and community than use of lethal force. Whenever the actions of police result in serious bodily injury or death, intended or not, they are thoroughly investigated with outcomes ranging from administrative employment action, criminal charges, training or change in equipment or procedure.

This philosophy statement articulates the basic premise of the Mount Vernon Police Department Policy with regard to use of force and that is: *The protection and preservation of human life stands as the central concern in any consideration of force by police officers. It is more important than either the apprehension of criminal offenders or the protection of property.*

Embraced in the philosophy surrounding the Department's policy on use of force are the issues of training and the continuous pursuit of less lethal alternatives so that lethal force is a viable option in fewer instances.

The Department will, to the best of its ability, provide training in technical skills as well as crisis management, law, policy, and human skills. This commitment to training is based on the assumption that officers who are better trained and better managed are less likely to employ elevated levels of force without justification and care.

All sworn personnel shall receive and demonstrate their understanding of the Use of Force Policy prior to being authorized to carry a firearm or other defensive instruments.

Q: How does the Department prepare its officers for the situations they may encounter?

A: Identifying people who have demonstrated the character, values, temperament and skills to police our community is where it starts. New hires are immersed into our Vision, Mission, Broad Goals, Organizational Values (8), Code of Professional Conduct & Responsibility, Canon of Ethics (9), and Ethical Standards (52). They receive a minimum 3-4 weeks orientation, successfully complete 720 of Washington State Police certified training, and 12-14 additional weeks of field training applying classroom and role play into real life situations. State law requires 24 hours of continuing training for every police officer (we typically exceed this) including a two-hour Crisis Intervention Training module intended for de-escalation.

Select police academy (cjtc.wa.gov) topics:

Professional Ethics, Critical Thinking, Understanding Perception and Bias, Liability, Emotional Intelligence & Learning, People In Crisis, Arrest Procedures, Criminal Procedure/Law, Verbal Skills, Defensive Tactics, Crisis Intervention/Management, Patrol De-escalation, Excited Delirium

Continuing Education (MVPD) Examples (Selected from 2018/19):

21st Century Police Leadership, Crisis Intervention, Defensive Tactics, Acknowledging & Managing Hidden Bias, Leadership, Wellness & Resiliency, Less Lethal & Lethal Force Use, Mental Illness, Force Science Institute, Crisis Intervention & Negotiation, Force Response Liability Prevention, School Based Crisis Management, First Aid, CPR

Q: How do officers approach situations that may require use of force?

A: This is guided by law, policy and training. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled (Graham V. Conner) police may only use an amount of force that is reasonable to affect the lawful purpose intended. They explain that reasonable under one set of circumstances may be deemed unreasonable under different though similar circumstances. The courts weigh severity of the alleged crime, immediate threat posed by the suspect to the officer(s) or public's safety, and officer's perception of the suspect's level of resistance to arrest or attempts to evade. Our policy permits only the necessary amount of force that is reasonable and justified with respect to the offense, subject's actions and available alternatives.

Q: What are examples of “reasonable” considerations when force is used?

A:

- Conduct, actual or perceived, displayed by the individual at the time contacted.
- Age, size, relative strength, skill level, injury/exhaustion between the officer and subject.
- Number of officers versus number of subjects.
- Effects of drugs/alcohol on one's mental capacity.
- Possession or proximity of weapons.
- The method to which the subject has been restrained and his/her ability to resist it.
- With time and circumstances permitting, reasonable alternatives available to the officer.
- Seriousness of the offense or reason for the contact (officer's belief).
- Officer's training and experience.
- Potential for injury to citizens, officers, subject involved.
- Escape risk.
- Known history of the offender.
- Other exigent circumstances that may be occurring.

Q: How does the officer determine how much or what type of force to apply?

A: We always prefer willing and voluntary compliance. The objective of every encounter where police meet resistance is to minimize injury to everyone involved. We equip officers with options both less-lethal and lethal because we don't require that officers sustain physical injury before applying reasonable force. The justification for using these tools is based on at least the reasonable considerations listed above regarding what alternatives are available and the three factors outlined by the court.

Example: An officer who is 5'2" 110 lbs. facing a 6'2" 225 lb. resistive subject may be justified using force tools that wouldn't necessarily apply to a 6'3" 250 lb. officer. An intoxicated subject (drugs or alcohol) could possess higher thresholds to pain or increased strength from substance use.

Q: What happens after an officer uses force?

A:

- Ensure medical aid is available where injury is known.
- Protect and control the scene.
- Identify witnesses, secure statements where it applies.
- Document actions in a police report.
- Complete a Force Use Review form (any force greater than verbal commands)
- Consider criminal charges for the offender's actions.

Accompanying officers have the same duty including applying appropriate force, intervening if force is inappropriate and reporting all actions observed.

Q: Who reviews use of force incidents?

A:

- Whenever an officer uses force greater than verbal commands, it is reviewed by a supervisor. A commander completes a second review and that report is sent to the Chief of Police for final review and disposition.
- In any case, on or off-duty, where force is by firearm, or may have appeared extreme or excessive, or injury was incurred, or death resulted, or a complaint was filed, the Chief of Police has the discretion to call a Use of Force Review Board. The investigation is usually handled by the Skagit County Multiple Agency Response Team or another outside agency.
- The Chief of Police selects a Command Officer as Chairperson and two other representatives are selected. Their responsibility is to review all the facts and arrive at a justified or unjustified force use finding. This process is secondary or separate from any criminal review which is handled by the prosecutor's office.

Q: What early intervention system for addressing inappropriate/excessive conduct do you have?

A: An advantage of being a mid-sized agency is we are very familiar with each other and work habits are difficult to hide. Every officer works on a squad or in a unit that has a direct supervisor that monitors work behaviors daily. The formal performance appraisal system includes a "consensus" component where all supervisors and the Patrol Commander hear and provide input to an officer's performance. We annually track force use, vehicle pursuits and conduct complaints and one of the goals is to determine frequent users and appropriate conduct. We have a formal discipline system that ranges from supervisory review, division level review, formal internal affairs investigation and an Employee Accountability Board process. All of these can have performance consequences that range from verbal warnings, re-training, suspension and termination. If the conduct is potentially criminal, an outside agency is assigned to investigate and the County Prosecutor's Office determines charges.

Q: How often do Mount Vernon Police Officers use force?

A: Mount Vernon Police Department averages 22,000 service calls per year and force was necessary in 61 of those instances (less than 0.3%). The most frequent types of cases involved domestic violence crimes, assisting another officer or agency, assault, theft or warrant arrest. The most frequent type of force used was use of hands to control a subject who resisted.

Carotid Restraints (Choke Hold) & Body Cameras

Q: Does Mount Vernon Police Department approve of carotid restraints?

A: No

Q: Do Mount Vernon Police Officers wear body cameras?

A: No. Body camera evidence is important, but it's not the sole determinant in an investigation. The City manages a robust public camera system we draw from. Nearby business and residential security video footage is canvassed for evidence, as well. Private cell phone video or images are often volunteered to police for evidence. Witness evidence includes those accompanying the involved person, any by-standers, canvassing the surrounding neighborhood area and other police officers. Physical and forensic evidence are used. During an internal affairs process, the ability to administratively compel statements for use in findings. All of these and more are examples that are used in place, or even with, body camera footage.

Making A Police Conduct Complaint

Q: How does a person report a complaint?

A: There are several options:

- In-person Mount Vernon Police Department - 1805 Continental Place, MV
- By phone (360) 336-6271 (MVPD) * (360) 428-3211 (24-hour Police Dispatch)
- On-line <http://www.mountvernonwa.gov/819/Citizen-Complaints>

Complaint review is first handled by a supervisor or command level officer depending on the circumstances and findings are sent to the Chief of Police for a final review.

Hiring Practices

Q: How are police officers selected for hiring?

A:

1. Recruiting – *Formal Recruiters seek applicants who reflect MVPD values, traits & needed skills.*
2. Written test – *Cognitive ability, organizational citizenship, integrity, intercultural sensitivity, past Performance*
3. Physical Ability Test
4. Panel interview – *1 of 4 raters is a citizen representative.*
5. Job Suitability Testing – *Compares applicant's answers to broader pool of LE professionals.*
6. Polygraph Examination – *Drug/alcohol use, reported and unreported crimes committed, domestic violence, issues related to individual integrity/character*
7. Background Investigation – *Reference checks, military record, work history, school history, family relations, neighborhood canvas, former spouses/friends, etc.*
8. Police Chief/Command Staff/Mayor Interviews
9. Psychological Testing – *Written testing and interview with a professionally certified psychologist.*
10. Medical Testing – *Medically sound and screened for drugs.*

Police Officers are in probationary status for 1 year following successful completion of the police academy. Unsatisfactory performance can result in termination without cause during this period.

Daily written evaluation occurs during field training. Written evaluations occur every two months following field training until probation is complete. Written evaluations occur every six months and are consensus scored by all the supervisors and Division Commander.

All of these steps are viewed as 'hiring continuum' designed to select and hire highly competent professionals.

Who fits with us

Individuals whose interests align with a community-based policing approach who enjoy working with people, solving problems, are intellectually curious and have a strong desire to help others. We look for people who are creative, effective communicators, exercise great common sense and follow through.

Community Connection

- **Citizens Academy Program** – For 26 years annually, and for nearly 600 community members, we have opened our doors to the community and, through education, have increased communications and understanding between citizens and the police. Together, it is easier to identify neighborhood and community problems and effect realistic solutions.
- **Preparatory Academy Program** – 15 years, nearly 170 high school students learning from each other.
- **Crime Prevention Division** – Police Sergeant, Public Education Officers, Community Service Officers (2) dedicated to helping the community understand crime causes, policing challenges and understand issues requiring mutual understanding about neighborhood and community concerns.
- **Embedded Social Worker** – A civilian position requiring a masters in social work, that works directly with our homeless population and assists us in effective relations and problem resolution.
- **Block Watch Groups** – Over 100 diversely different neighborhoods that interact with police.
- **School Resource Officers** – Full-time police officers in our middle and high schools working with students, staff, parents and learning from each other.
 - LEAP student leadership club performing community service and school activities.
 - High school criminal justice program.
- **Kulshan Creek Resource Officer & Neighborhood Station** – A neighborhood community that is predominately Latino. Resource officer and neighborhood presence since late 1990's. Currently a bi-lingual/bi-cultural Neighborhood Resource Officer works in this community.
 - Quarterly resident meetings. Average attendance 20.
 - Annual neighborhood street festival
 - U.S. Park Service/NW Cascade Institute bringing urban youth to our parks and forests.
 - Skagit Valley College Radio Echos de la Comunidad
- **Recruiting/Hiring** – 6 police officers and 1 Community Service Officer are Spanish bi-lingual/bi-cultural. 3 police officers and 1 Community Service Officer, 1 Animal Control Officer are women. 49 total police officers/CSO/ACO.
- **Drug Court Team** – We are one in a multi-disciplinary team using treatment and diversion to reduce recidivism.
- **Parks Enrichment** – There is a community segment who use our outdoors both recreationally and promoting ecological responsibility. Our Park Ranger provides security, law enforcement and interpretive services that allows park users and city officials to learn from each other.
- **Personal Commitments** – When our staff are not working, they volunteer their time in service clubs, church and non-profit boards, coach youth sports, volunteer in schools, teach part-time and many other places that become approachable moments for community members to seek out police perspectives or help comfortably.
- **Citizen Volunteers** – The department enjoys the support of more than 60 community volunteers in active support to the Department. Our volunteers work hand in hand with officers on a daily basis and are 'eyes and ears' for the community both internal to the Department and in service to the public.

