Mark Schultz and Rachel Vilsack

Protecting Minnesota

Law enforcement professionals, from police officers to correctional caseworkers, say strong communication skills are essential to succeeding at the job.

About 17,000 people work in law enforcement in Minnesota, often facing heavy workloads and high stress. For law enforcement professionals, the opportunity to help society and work with offenders makes the job of enforcing Minnesota's laws and protecting citizens worth it.

One of those law enforcement professionals is Matthew Mork, who said making his career choice was easy.

"My father was in law enforcement for 30 years. I was always proud of him for what he did, and it's all I've ever wanted to do," he said. "It's a job with a purpose and a meaning."

Mork works for the Sherburne County Sherriff's Office as an investigator and emergency response unit team member. The average citizen would think of him as a police officer.

"I drive with red lights and sirens to get to situations that most people run away from," he said. "It is my responsibility to intervene and protect those in need."

The first encounter many people have with law enforcement — and the criminal justice system — is often through a police officer. About 8,250 people work as police and sheriff's patrol officers in Minnesota, protecting life and property by enforcing local, tribal, state or federal laws and ordinances. Strong interpersonal skills are critical in the job, and physical work conditions are the norm.

"I interact with people of all temperaments and need to be able to talk with them in a professional manner, regardless of how they talk to me," Mork said. "It is also very important to be able to remain calm during pressure situations and to be able to react confidently without hesitation."

To prepare for his career, Mork earned a bachelor's degree in law enforcement from Minnesota State University Mankato. In Minnesota, a two- or four-year degree is required for police officers, and gaining a license requires a 10-week skills course approved by the Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training.

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The median wage for police and sheriff's patrol officers varies from $21.85 per hour in southwestern Minnesota to $32.06 per hour in the Twin Cities. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that jobs in state and federal agencies will be competitive because they offer high pay and more opportunities for promotion. Bilingual applicants with law enforcement degrees or military experience, especially investigative experience, will have the best opportunities in federal agencies.

The need to replace retiring police and sheriff's patrol officers will drive future job prospects in Minnesota, where it's estimated that 3,000 new and replacement job openings will be available between 2010 and 2020.

Mork acknowledges that some aspects of his job are difficult to deal with, like responding to calls involving death and the long and irregular work hours.

"The hours can be hard on family life," he said. "You end up working late often or working holidays and missing family functions."

But the positives outweigh the negatives, he said. "I don't know a better way to say it, but there is an absolute satisfaction in helping the good people and putting the bad guys in jail."

Behind Bars

Most offenders held in jails and prisons in Minnesota will meet someone in Shawn Yurick's position. Yurick is a correctional officer at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Stillwater.

Correctional officers and jailers guard inmates in penal or rehabilitative institutions and assist in the transfer of prisoners between jail, courtrooms and prison. Nearly 5,000 people work as correctional officers in Minnesota at federal, state and local institutions, earning an average wage of $21.61 per hour. Replacement workers will be needed as current correctional officers retire or otherwise leave the profession.

Yurick has worked as a correctional officer for 21 years in both Arizona and Minnesota, although he studied at the Culinary Institute of America. In the early 1990s, he found the career after looking for an opportunity with steady pay and good benefits.

"Back then Arizona was hurting for corrections officers; they were taking any able-bodied person. I had no experience and after the first year came to see that I was a good fit for this type of work," he said.

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According to Yurick, people interested in a correctional career should possess excellent communication skills, along with situational awareness (knowing what's going on around them) and self-awareness (knowing their abilities and limitations).

Yurick enjoys the security of his career, but noted it's not always easy to quantify the job's impact.

"Because I do not produce anything, the feeling of accomplishment is an intangible idea that I continually need to work on," he said. "At the end of the day all inmates are accounted for, and the public and my coworkers are safe."

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"When I go home the job stays behind walls, and when I walk back in the next day, home life stays home," he said. "You do not get that with most jobs."

Abby Domagalski also works at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Stillwater. She has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Minnesota State University Moorhead, with an emphasis in sociology.

"Ever since I can remember, I have been totally fascinated by the criminal mind," she said. "Until I began working in a prison setting, I had never truly realized the vast devastation that is caused by criminal behavior."

As a corrections security caseworker, Domagalski has the opportunity to know offenders, from their crimes to their family histories and how they were raised.

"When you see the home lives that a lot of offenders were raised in, it is easier to see why they ended up in prison, and I can be a bit more empathetic," she said.

It's this background information that Domagalski can use to assist offenders so that they will be successful when they leave prison.

"It's so easy to say that a lot of the offenders we work with will be incarcerated again sometime in the future," she said. "Caseworkers are one of the few positions in the prison that can work one-on-one with offenders and actually may make a difference in helping an offender not return to incarceration."

For a correctional caseworker, communication skills are crucial.

"You have to be able to speak to both offenders within the prison, as well as families and victims in the community," she said. "It can be tricky because they are obviously two very different populations."

The number of offenders assigned to a correctional caseworker can be high. Domagalski is responsible for 105 to 113 inmates at any given time, which can be overwhelming and lead to burnout.

"We are also each expected to take on extra duties outside of our primary positions," she explained. "For instance, I do the receiving and orientation class, which is a one-hour course that all offenders must attend within two weeks of arriving at the facility."

Reading about some of the crimes committed by offenders can take its toll, she said, but it's important to be able to separate yourself from the job.

Spotlight on Law Enforcement Careers

Sarah Velander

Job: Clinical program therapist

Employer: Minnesota Correctional Facility – Faribault

Education: Bachelor of science degree, licensed alcohol and drug counselor

Key skills: Patience, open mindedness, ability to look at the person and not the crime

What trends do you see? An under-diagnosis of mental health issues and the significance of generational trauma for African American and Native American men; there is a need for trauma- informed services for all.

Sgt. Doug Stokes

Job: Shift commander

Employer: Winona County Sheriff

Education: Bachelor's degree, Wisconsin police training, Minnesota SKILLS training

Key skills: Problem solving, organization, listening, interpersonal communication, teamwork

What trends do you see? Drug courts seem to be the new trend in Minnesota. A different court system has been created to focus more on the rehabilitation of non-violent drug users. In effect, more treatment or probation options rather than incarceration.

Brian Gaddis

Job: 911/radio communications operator

Employer: Minnesota State Patrol

Education: High school graduate, plus one year of college

Key skills: Multi-tasking, stress management, customer relations, basic computer aptitude

What trends do you see? Texting while driving is the most recent traffic epidemic. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), more than 3,000 people were killed in 2010 in crashes involving distracted driving.

"It can also be hard to remain positive when dealing with an offender who will never go home," she said. "What can you possibly tell him to get him to think positive when he has nothing to look forward to?"

Back on the Street

When offenders are released, they may meet Jeff Harris, who is a corrections agent — or probation officer — for the Minnesota Department of Corrections in Wabasha.

Probation officers assist offenders who are sentenced to probation, offering services such as housing and employment, all with the goal of helping to prevent future crimes. They also monitor their clients to verify they are meeting the conditions of their probations and routinely update case files for the court. Minnesota has 1,500 probation officers and correctional treatment specialists — including Domagalski's profession — earning an average wage of $30.60 per hour. Job prospects will continue to be good, with an estimated 620 job openings projected in Minnesota between 2010 and 2020.

A career in law enforcement wasn't Harris' first aspiration.

"I started college with the idea of being a teacher. I had a lot of friends who were going into law enforcement," he said.

After taking and enjoying a sociology class, Harris switched his major to law enforcement and graduated from Winona State University with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a police officer or a probation officer. I did ride-alongs with both and thought that probation seemed like a better fit for me."

"I think the biggest skill for a probation officer is the ability to communicate with everyone in the system," he said.

This includes effective verbal communication with co-workers and offenders, but also written communication. Probation officers record daily interactions with clients on the computer and produce written reports for the court.

"I like the ability to communicate with people and attempt to make some positive change for the offender."

Harris said that it is also important to build relationships and stay organized. This is especially important in a job where no two days are the same.

Harris, who is marking his 10-year anniversary in state law enforcement this year, noted there are challenges to a career in probation, particularly when the positive changes that one hopes to see in an offender don't occur, despite a lot of hard work.

"I like the challenge," Harris said. "There are many days where we go to work with a plan of what we want to get done, but for some reason or another it doesn't happen. It is not your typical 9 to 5 job."

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