

One-on-One with Master Police Officer Shauna Moller

Voiceover

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Welcome to The Beat, a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice, featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines. The Beat provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:26

Welcome to another episode of The Beat. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. While most millennials are seeking to become Instagram influencers or trying to become the next TikTok sensation, our special guest decided to take a deep dive into law enforcement during one of the most recent intense and scrutinized times in policing. At the young age of 22 and fresh out of college, our guest made a career decision that today, she says, became a journey of transformation and growth that she needed.

Today's guest for The Beat is Master Police Officer Shauna Moller. Master Police Officer Moller is a graduate of George Mason University's Criminology Law and Society program and a Manassas, Virginia, city police department officer. Her commitment to public safety with Manassas City Police has led her to enhance community engagement and awareness through initiatives such as Girls on the Run, domestic violence awareness, elder assistance, publicizing 988, and Marcus Alert, which is for mental health awareness. We're going to get into that. She has stopped by The Beat to discuss her take of her experience of being a millennial police officer as well as her outreach and engagement efforts. I'm really excited to have her here. Officer Moller, welcome to The Beat.

Shauna Moller

01:42

Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Jennifer Donelan

01:44

So I do want to spend a lot of time... And I don't know, do you mind being called a millennial? Is millennial a dirty word these days or are you proud of that patch?

Shauna Moller

01:52

Technically, a lot of people, depending on who you look at, call me Generation Z. So I like to refer to myself as a zillennial, because I'm right between the two. Grew up with a cell phone, but didn't have it until like seventh grade.

Jennifer Donelan

02:06

Got you. No, I love this. You are a... Say it again?

Shauna Moller

02:11

Zillennial. Right between Generation Z and millennials.

Jennifer Donelan

02:14

Millennial, zillennial. We've just made up a new term here on The Beat. You heard it here first. Mark your calendars. Okay. So at the time when you were coming into policing, describe what was happening in the world at that time.

Shauna Moller

02:24

So I got hired by Manassas City in January of 2020. So in January of 2020, the world was still intact. But then, as we moved into halfway through my time at the academy, exactly halfway at my academy experience, that's when COVID shutdown happened. Going through the academy and then everyone having the unease of, okay, what's going to happen? Obviously, we still need police in the world, so what's going to happen with our training? What's going on? Our academy actually made a quick decision to send us home after we finished up some of our lessons that week, and then we did online virtual learning for about two months. Which was a very unique experience because, when you think of the police academy, you think of running and doing pushups and defense tactics and everything, and we weren't able to do that except for PT instructors watching us through a video camera to make sure that we were doing it. So, very unique experience there, but we made it through.

And then right when we were about to finish up at the academy, that's when George Floyd happened. So you have the unease of just being at the academy. With everything shut down, you can't even interact with your peers to learn and grow. You now have this uneasiness of majority of the world, I'll say, fighting against your career choices and questioning why you're going into that.

Jennifer Donelan

03:46

So take me back. Prior to going into the academy, you're in college, you're at George Mason, so you're studying criminology, criminal justice. Are you planning to go in law enforcement when you pick those majors? Take me through...

Let me offer this disclaimer. We talk a lot about recruitment and retention on this program because it's a challenge that law enforcement agencies are facing across the country, right? So when I have an amazing young woman like yourself, and you at 22, you're in college, you're like, "I want to be a police officer," when so how many of your friend... How many of your friends made that decision? Probably

not many, if, at all, any. What was going through your mind? Why did you make the decisions that you made?

Shauna Moller

04:27

So I grew up actually planning on taking over the family business. And then my dad pretty much said, “No, that’s not what I want for you. I want you to have your own future, your own career choices.” And growing up, I was obsessed with crime shows, as I think most kids have that phase at some point. So I grew up with that, and I jokingly told my mom that I wanted to be a homicide detective.

Fast-forward, I then got really into criminology and just why people make the choices that they do and what leads them into crime. You watch Criminal Minds and you get obsessed with the FBI and the Behavioral Analysis Unit. So I went to George Mason with their criminology degree because majority of their professors are actually people who either are retired FBI, Department of Justice. They have people that did the work and they’re close to DC, so I knew I would have a little bit more of an in there if I wanted to go federal. So when I went to George Mason, that was the goal. And then I also double majored in psychology as well, because I was able to do both in four years and they really go hand in hand.

I did all that. And then I was taking all these classes, and I had a lot of really, really great professors there, and I realized that my life goal wasn’t to go solve the big crimes. I get more appreciation when I’m able to help someone one-on-one and see the growth of the work that I’m putting into things. So I ultimately decided that local police department was going to give me that fulfillment a lot more than if I was going to go sit at the FBI and go through some white collar crime or the bigger stuff. I knew I wanted to sit down with people one-on-one and help them as best I could.

Jennifer Donelan

06:15

So let me just stop you right there, because I got to keep this deep dive going here, because I know that there are answers up in here that will be great clues for other departments as they are thinking about how to attract young people to their career. So, it’s the shows. You’re watching the shows as a little kid. You love the murder shows. I did, too. I’m with you, the crime shows, love them. I love British crime. I love it all, right? But I still didn’t want to be a police officer, as much as I enjoy those shows. Do you have law enforcement in your family? Were you ever touched by crime? Anyone you know ever touched by crime? What is it that gets you moved to police and, say, not being a lawyer?

Shauna Moller

06:51

So shockingly enough, I don’t have any law enforcement in my family. I never really dealt with the police when I was growing up. I had one incident and it terrified me, because I thought I did something wrong, but I didn’t. They came to the wrong house. And then I didn’t really get exposed to them. It was just kind of a pipe dream. And then I fell in love with the background of everything. So I fell in love with the criminology side of things.

And growing up, I was really, really into public service, so I was always volunteering for things. I was actually in a program in middle school called The Spirit of Bethlehem, where all we did every week was do charity and things for charity, planning things. And I loved that period of my life where I can just go out and help people. So I knew that going into law enforcement, that's something I'd be able to do, which is kind of what struck it up. So the start of it was, oh, it's cool, and it's something that I find fascinating, to then getting really invested into the study of criminology and why people's brains work the way that they do, and then backing it with my love of helping people and service.

Jennifer Donelan

08:01

So are you exposed in college? Those criminology courses, is that where you're like, "I think I love this," or is it when you stepped into your first police department? It sounds like that happened in college, yes?

Shauna Moller

08:11

Yeah, I definitely think that it started in college, and I had an awesome experience. With the Bachelor of Science degree with criminology at George Mason, they make you do an internship. So I actually got to do an internship with the DC police, MPD. I was an intern for their homicide division for a summer. I will just say, it was eye-opening. I grew up in a, I won't say a small town, I'll say a medium city, where we don't have the big city feel and it's relatively laid back. And I grew up in suburbia, so going to DC police and getting thrown into being in charge of their files for all the deaths that they've had was just crazy. And the culture behind that entire department is just so different than what I grew up with, so the exposure was fantastic.

Jennifer Donelan

09:02

I can only imagine. I got to say, that internship piece, that's a big deal. I know it's a tool that's been in play for many, many years now, but I think we tend to underestimate it. It's that exposure and experience and being in the place with the people, ability to touch and see things, experience those things, that really do tend to make a difference. I remember when I walked in on my first newsroom, and I said, "This is it." It spoke to me. So those internships... I don't know if all law enforcement agencies offer internships, but obviously it was a great idea that MPD had that worked for you, Master Police Officer Moller.

Shauna Moller

09:43

It definitely was extremely beneficial to go through. And you also have the mentorship piece. So when you go through a college program and you're learning about criminology and how police departments work, you don't really know how they work until you get into one, and how fast-paced it is. And just all the different problems that police are tasked with is just astronomical. So going in and having a mentor that can take you under their wing and joke around with you and make it seem a little bit less intimidating while also showing you how cool it is, I think, really helped set my path.

Jennifer Donelan

10:23

That's amazing. That's really valuable information. And I want to move into the programs that you launched and you're involved with at Manassas City Police. But before we do that, since we're on the topic of recruitment and retention, because you came into the law enforcement world right when the world shuts down and you stay and stick with the job. So in your opinion, because I'd love to know your specific opinion, how do you think law enforcement generally is doing recruitment right and where are they getting it wrong?

Shauna Moller

10:54

I think they're getting it right by, well, one, we focus a lot on veterans coming out of the service, which is always a good place to start, and then we're falling back when it comes to retention with people that are coming out of college. So you can't be a police officer until you're 21. So now, there's that awkward gap of, okay, what am I going to do from high school to going into law enforcement, if that is what your dream is. So a lot of people nowadays, especially in my generation, went to college, because we were constantly told that that's what we needed to do is go get a college degree. Go get a ton of debt and then you'll be successful in life. So you do that, and then you come out.

And with law enforcement, it's very difficult because you have some people who are having college degrees and then you have some people who don't have college degrees, but we're all at the same level. So I honestly think that sometimes when you're coming out of college and you have all these high hopes for things that you want to do with your career and with your life, and now a lot of people get stuck as the "I'm the new officer and I don't have a say in things", so they get stuck and they feel like their career isn't progressing as quickly as they'd like it to. And you have all of the stuff that's going on with our current environment with police officers, where they don't feel like they're being appreciated, and it's not keeping people invested in their departments.

I think what we really lack sometimes with departments is creating that sense of family and loyalty nowadays. You can hear stories from a bunch of police officers. Every police officer that I've talked to that has been in this world for about 10 years or more, they'll talk about how much fun they just had with their coworkers and the bonds that they had with them. And I can tell you that I have bonds with my coworkers, but they're not nearly what they used to be. With COVID, we've stopped doing a lot of the winters' balls or family get-togethers with officers and building up that family value system. So I know our department is trying to get back into that, so that's been a little bit helpful. But again, it's just building up that loyalty to push everyone.

And I honestly think that with the newer generations coming out of high school right now, they're not being shoved into college, so they're not being shoved into all this debt and everything that's going on. So I think, honestly, they're going to be more likely to stick around longer, because they knew what their goal was initially, was to be a police officer. And you don't have these people that go through college and are told, well, you can do all of these great things with your degree. So when I went through the

academy, I went in with six. I am currently the only one left out of the six out of my recruitment class, because we're a smaller department.

Jennifer Donelan

13:54

Were there other college grads in that group of six?

Shauna Moller

13:57

Five out of the six of us.

Jennifer Donelan

13:59

And where did they go?

Shauna Moller

14:00

So one of them is now working with Homeland Security. One went to a larger department, just so he had more availability of experiences and everything. He just didn't really mesh here. He didn't really find his home. Another one now works for the ABC, so the people who manage all of the state laws for alcohol. And the other one just decided he did not want to be a police officer at all, just wasn't the right fit for him, and he fell out pretty early.

Jennifer Donelan

14:29

We want people to make decisions. If you don't want to do this, please get out, because it's not the type of job you could just do and just go through the motions. This is a big deal and you need all of you and more in order to do this job. The attracting/recruitment of college students is something that's talked about quite a bit. And one of the things, having these discussions, are you seeing law enforcement agencies at these college career fairs? Is it discussed among college students? Or is everybody being pushed to be doctors and lawyers and sort of the expected "you've got your college education, these are the jobs you go do", and that's not typically police officer, when, in fact, though, that college experience can help you tremendously in this job?

Shauna Moller

15:12

Yes. When I was at George Mason pre-COVID, so I know that some things have died down a little bit, there was a ton of police departments at my career fair. But I think, particularly at George Mason, because we're so close to DC, my viewpoint is probably a little skewed, a lot of my classmates wanted to go federal or wanted to be big-time lawyers. I think in my classes there was only a small handful of people who wanted to actually go into local law enforcement. Even I didn't make that decision until about halfway through my time in college that I wanted to go local.

Jennifer Donelan

15:57

Now, I know we didn't have you on here to talk about recruitment, but I just so badly wanted to pick your brain because of your story. You're here because of all the amazing work that you've been performing in the community. You and I, our paths have crossed, and that's when you won an award. Tell us about that. Who was it from? What was that about?

Shauna Moller

16:15

So I was nominated by my lieutenant and my sergeant for the seventh annual Attorney General's Award for Distinguished Community Policing. So, it was something I did not expect at all. They put me in for it, did not tell me, as well as one of my coworkers. And we found out that we were finalists probably like two months before the winners were announced. And then once the winners were announced, we had two weeks to go to DC, which, luckily for me, was not hard, just an hour drive.

But it all seemed surreal because it's just not something that you ever really expect. Usually law enforcement is a very thankless job. We get little awards here and there from our community or maybe the county, but never really federal recognition. So it was something I still don't think has really set in for me of how big that is, especially how early on in my career I am to know that I've peaked this early. But it was definitely something I'm very thankful for and really just validated all the work that I'm doing to encourage me to keep moving forward because it is being appreciated.

Jennifer Donelan

17:25

That's amazing. And you have not peaked yet, okay? You've got way too much life ahead of you. You have not peaked. You're just going to have an amazing career, okay? Okay. So you have focused your energy and efforts into the community, community-oriented policing. Is that a fair statement?

Shauna Moller

17:42

Yes, very much so.

Jennifer Donelan

17:45

Tell us about why community-oriented policing is so important to you.

Shauna Moller

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So I put a lot of stock into community policing because the more you know, one, about your community, the more that you can respond to it, the more that you know what's going on, you know who to talk to, investigations are easier, tips are given more freely, and there's just that general trust and peace that comes with working in that environment.

So I've noticed, I do a ton of community events, and when I get to meet people in the community and they're able to decompress with me and tell me concerns or I'm able to teach them something, the next time I see them, they immediately just smile and you can see that relief. And half the time, they run over and give me a hug or something. And it just makes you feel more appreciated in the community. And then I also know that if those people see something going on in the community, they're going to report it, and they're going to report it quickly, and they're going to trust that it's going to be handled correctly.

So in those times of mistrust of the police, here in Manassas City, we really didn't experience much of that because, our community, we are so heavily involved. And I attribute a lot of that to our chief, because he's lived here his whole life. He's great with our city council. And so with that trust built in and then our officers getting involved, you can see how much the local citizens trust us with their property, their lives, and they just get happy to see us. We get asked to go to events constantly. So it's just a better environment to work in when you truly feel appreciated.

Jennifer Donelan

19:28

Absolutely. So can we discuss some of the outreach and awareness initiatives that you've participated in? And let's first start with mental health awareness. And mental health is at the center of what percentage of calls that police run on? You know what I mean? It is a central character. So what is the Marcus Alert and why should our listeners know about it?

Shauna Moller

19:51

So the Marcus Alert initiative is something that started in Virginia a while ago. It came from the Marcus-David Peters Act. And it was basically how police officers are responding to these mental health calls and, people who are experiencing mental health crisis, why are they getting hurt or killed in these responses?

During the review of that, obviously there's nothing that we can do in certain situations to save everyone. We have to think about public safety and our safety as well. So what they came up with was trying to reroute a lot of mental health 911 calls to the 988 crisis line. And locally, they've done a fantastic job of educating us and also making sure that all of the first responders are all on the same page in terms of what calls should be going to this crisis line. Because in addition to making it something public, where anyone can call 988, which has taken over the National Suicide Hotline... So if you try to call the National Suicide Hotline, it's actually just 988 now. If someone calls 911, our dispatchers also have a triage system where, if it's low enough where they don't think that a police response is necessary, then they send it to 988 so someone can talk to someone who is a specialist in mental health and getting them resources.

Jennifer Donelan

21:23

Tell us more about that.

Shauna Moller

21:24

Our Prince William County Community Services Board, obviously they oversee all of our mental health initiatives for the county, and they have a little sect that I report a lot of people to that's called the Outreach and Engagement team. So what they do is, after the fact, if one of my police officers had a call that involves someone that was in a mental health crisis but didn't really meet criteria to be hospitalized, they can write a referral to the Outreach and Engagement team, and then they can go follow up with them and get them connected to the resources that they need to try to make sure that it doesn't escalate to that hospitalization.

Jennifer Donelan

22:04

And how do you think it's going?

Shauna Moller

22:05

I think it's going beautifully. So they actually started the Outreach and Engagement team the same time that I started my position. So I got to create my position thanks to a grant. So them coming at the same time, we were able to grow as a team. And they come and sit with me once a week, they come to my station, and we discuss different cases. A lot of times, we have some people that are repeat callers that we have, and we will address to see what can we do to make sure that they're rerouting from police services into things that will help them long-term. So we work really well as a team. We've gotten help for a lot of people, and you can clearly see a decrease in repeat callers in terms of mental health thanks to them. So I attribute a lot of my success in terms of mental health to that program.

Jennifer Donelan

22:56

That frees up resources, and that's huge on any day of the week. So let's also talk about community training now. You do community training with citizens, elderly assistance, Elder Care Resource Fair, domestic violence, the Girls on the Run. Just take us through that. And then, if you could, just talk about how that's all impacting everything, because you have invested a lot of time and energy into these programs.

Shauna Moller

23:21

We'll start with the Elder Care Resource Fair. So I review all of our mental health reports that officers believe was mental health. Obviously, I probably miss a few. But I also wanted to make sure I was pulling all of the adult in-need-of-services reports because a lot of those are connected to people with dementia. And if you have dementia, that's not something that's going to easily be fixed. That's something that we need to work with the family to get a good practice in place to make sure that everyone's staying safe, and either that's them staying in the house or if they're moving to an assisted living facility.

So I saw a lot of our adult in-need-of-services people coming up over and over and over again, just because either they don't have family nearby or the family that was there just was overwhelmed and just didn't know how to properly care for their loved one. Because not only is it physically demanding in terms of time, and also if your loved one is your spouse and you're also the same age, but it's also just mentally draining to watch your loved one struggle like that.

So I felt for them and I wanted to see what I could do to try to bridge the gap. Because usually when officers go to a scene and it's someone that is struggling and is elderly, there's nothing we can really do except for make sure that everyone is safe in the house. So I came up with the Elder Care Resource Fair because, while the police department isn't able to help too much, there are a plethora of resources in the area that can. So I wanted to be able to bring all those resources together to make it easily accessible for our citizens to learn more about what's available.

Jennifer Donelan

25:04

And you know what that's so key about the program you pulled together? It's in person. I think so often too many forget that our aging population doesn't use QR codes. They don't do virtual meetings. They're not signing up on online registration forms. Now and that's not to blanket everyone with that generalization, but I'm just saying, you have to make sure that you are thinking through the messaging methods in hopes of trying to reach these audiences. That's huge that you created an in-person event. I'm assuming it must be during the day, during the business day, when people are available to help usher people back and forth, etc., that that increased your chances of good participation.

Shauna Moller

25:53

Yep. So we actually do it on a Saturday morning because we also wanted to bring these resources to the caregivers as well. So I wanted to make sure that it wasn't during work hours. But then you can't do it after work, because then you won't have the elderly population attending. So we do it on a Saturday morning so we don't ruin your whole weekend, quick, little four-hour event.

And we always have presentations as well. And these vary based off of what resources want to present and also what I'm seeing as an issue in the community. So we've done presentations on fraud awareness. This year, we're doing elder abuse. We've done just the transition from home to assisted living, and at what point do you need in-home care services, and things to look out for. We've done ones just on dementia, and what you need to look out for, and how you can properly care from them at home.

There's just so many topics that brush the surface of what you need going into it, and specifically for elders and living out the rest of your life. And a lot of them brush things that police officers will be called to, the fraud, the elder abuse. And then you have all of the dementia patients that are now starting to get aggressive because, with the dementia, you start diminishing in terms of emotional regulation. So you have the domestic violence cases or just domestic disputes between family members. So we respond to these all the time, but we just don't have anything that we can do to help. So that's why I

thought it was really important of educating the community on what can we do, what can't we do, how can we protect ourselves before we get to that state?

Jennifer Donelan

27:41

That's excellent. And if you make those type of allowances, the right time for an event, considering the population, understanding that caregivers will most likely be bringing them and need to benefit and will benefit from the information just as much as your elderly clients, just allowing for all those concessions to have the most successful event and the most reach, that requires thinking, but it's worth those extra steps.

Shauna Moller

28:08

Definitely. If we're putting all this work into it, you want it to mean something. So just thinking about who you're trying to deliver this message to is honestly key.

Jennifer Donelan

28:20

Let's move from mental health/elder care to the domestic violence awareness and Girls on the Run.

Shauna Moller

28:27

For domestic violence awareness, when I started my position, I was in charge of reviewing the domestic violence cases in addition to the mental health cases. What I was seeing over and over again when interacting with people is that they just don't know where to go to get help.

So what I wanted to do was just bring an entire event together where, just as a community, whoever felt comfortable with coming could come and sit down, learn more about what would happen if you called the police, about what resources we have in the area, and then also just hearing about survivors who have lived it and were able to get out. So then that way, if there's even one person in that room who is listening, maybe we could have changed their lives, whether that be because them themselves are a victim who's currently going through it or because they know someone who's going through it and now they have the right tools to be able to help encourage them to get out of that situation.

And I think, honestly, in terms of my role with those, it was just setting it up and then my presentation on easing the minds of everyone of, if you're in a domestic violence situation and you call 911, here's exactly what's going to happen. So according to what our best practices are for Manassas City Police Department, I literally go through, you're going to get a dispatcher, the dispatcher is going to ask you these questions. And then when officers arrive, there is a chance you might be put in handcuffs. It's okay. Just make sure you stay calm. Tell them the truth. It's just to make sure that everyone is separated and staying safe.

So going through those little things that officers don't think about... Because we always just think, oh, just listen to the police and everyone will be fine. Going through and easing the minds of people who might be calling us really is beneficial. You can see the understanding when you actually talk through the steps in the process and why we do things. It's actually pretty amazing to watch the reactions of everyone when I do that presentation.

Jennifer Donelan

30:33

And that's across the board. I mean, that's so helpful in every facet of law enforcement, just to peel back that curtain. Explaining to people, walking them through things, you see those light bulbs go off.

Shauna Moller

30:46

Exactly. And I think, again, it goes hand-in-hand with the community policing aspect. Educating your public on what your practices are eases their mind so much, because they don't understand the way that we think. But our favorite word in law enforcement is articulation. We all know why we're doing it. We just need the patience to be able to explain it to the public.

Jennifer Donelan

31:11

That's it. That's it. That's a slogan. Put it on a bumper sticker. Let's go. All right, Girls on the Run.

Shauna Moller

31:16

Girls on the Run is a program that I actually started coaching with when I was in college. So I believe, and I honestly lost count at this point, I think this is my 10th season coaching. But it is a 10-week program for girls that are ages eight to 13. And there's two different programs, but in Manassas, we blend them together just to make sure we have a good size of girls. And you hear Girls on the Run, you're like, "Oh, it's a running program. The police are just making these girls run all over the place." It's not a running program. Honestly, with some of my girls, you could call it Girls on the Walk.

Jennifer Donelan

31:53

That would be me, Girls on a Walk. I'm a girl on a walk.

Shauna Moller

31:55

Yeah. But what the goal of this program is, is to encourage girls to be confident in themselves, to make good life choices, to be able to regulate their emotions, make solid and good friendships that they know are going to help them achieve in life, and then also encourage them to do their best on what they can do on any given day. So we do this program. Yes, there is exercise and running involved, but I tell the girls every single day because I'll have... Again, they're like 10 to 12 years old. So they come up to me and they're like, "My foot hurts." And I'm like, "You have to make your decisions on what your best is

today.” And then, usually, they do so much more running than they expect to. And they have their friends that push each other, and it’s delightful to see because I didn’t even have to encourage them to do it, because it’s just growth that they’ve been getting through this program.

At the end, we actually get to do a 5K. The 5K is great because, the 10 weeks, it’s just you and your little team, and then the 5K is the entire region. So here in northern Virginia, we have a huge Girls on the Run system/network, thousands of little girls, who all get to run a 5K together. And family comes and coaches come, and I’ve convinced somehow every season to get police officers to volunteer their time to run with all these girls, which is always fun to see.

Jennifer Donelan

33:27

Yeah. I was going to say, I was a teenage girl and I was not fun to be around. Good on them.

Shauna Moller

33:33

Yes. So we have some really great officers who love working with kids, watching them, encouraging them throughout the 5K. Honestly, every time I pass them, it just brings a smile to my face, because they’re joking around. And again, that’s just breaking the barriers of these girls who may not feel comfortable around police initially. Now, they have Coach Shauna, Coach Alexis, Coach Becca. Oh yeah, that weird guy, Detective Jake Turpin, who was running with me and making jokes the whole time. Now, they identify with these people and can feel comfortable in the future calling the police.

One of my biggest pet peeves, and this was actually brought up in one of my college classes, is we have kids whose parents are threatening to call the police on them. They’re like, “Oh, if you don’t do this, we’re going to call the cops. They’re going to come get you.” And what that’s really doing, while you know you’re not going to actually do that probably, you’re inducing fear in terms of calling the police, because they think that they’re going to get in trouble. And because, what do you believe when you’re little and your parents are telling you something? You believe that that’s exactly what’s going to happen. So now, if someone calls the police, I’m going to get in trouble. There’s something to fear. So we’re building that into our kids at such a young age already. And if they’re not getting regular exposure to positive interactions with police, that can really embed themselves into how they view law enforcement.

Jennifer Donelan

35:03

And with every step, every run, you are effectively changing that. That’s so huge, because it takes the fear out of the young person. If the young person ever really needs police or needs to talk to a police officer, and it’s really critical, and you’ve removed that element of fear, that’s huge.

Shauna Moller

35:22

Yes, our department does really well with, again, just the community engagement piece. Because it’s not just me in our Community Services Department. We actually have officers whose sole job is

interacting with the kids in our community. So we have not just Girls on the Run, but we have Badges for Baseball. We have a Youth Quest program, which is for teenagers. We do countless little tours at preschools, and we show them their cars and everything.

So having those fun interactions with kids, it makes you feel more comfortable. Because you always have the one or two that hang back. You can see they're a little scared. And then you greet them with a smile, you give them one of the badge stickers, and then they light up. And now, you're one step closer to, if that kid is in danger, they feel comfortable coming to someone in uniform. Because the last thing that I want is for a child to be in danger, and then when we show up, them to be scared of us, to not tell us what's going on, to not be able to provide any information to help us with that investigation. We've even had kids that will run away and they just freeze because they don't feel comfortable, and all we need is like, "Hey, what's your address? Can we walk you home?" So that shutdown is what we're trying to avoid so that they feel comfortable.

Jennifer Donelan

36:42

That's amazing. My hat's off to you and my hat's off to your chief too. And listen, a word to the listeners. They may be listening to this and all the amazing programs that you have and thinking to themselves, they must not have any crime. They've got just way too much time on their hands to dedicate all these resources to building community links. You have crime.

Shauna Moller

37:02

Yes.

Jennifer Donelan

37:03

Yeah, you guys respond to calls. I know that for a fact.

Shauna Moller

37:06

Yep, we definitely do. And the only reason we are able to put this much effort into the community is because we applied for grants. So when I started five years ago, our community services was a sergeant, and that was pretty much it. And obviously, you have a lieutenant to go to, but he was busy planning community events and just doing permitting and all that fun stuff. So then we applied to grants, and then, all of a sudden, our community services was a sergeant and then two officers, which we called the community vitality officers. And so those are the ones that their job is working with the at-risk youth in our area and doing all of these community outreach events with, specifically, kids.

Then, about a year after that program was up and running and they really liked the outreach that they were doing, they applied for the grant that gave me my position. So then we were able to work as a team of the three of us, and we've said, "Okay, what does our community need? What do we need education on? What are the programs that we're really passionate about and are working well?" And

we've been able to fine-tune exactly what each of our roles are and how we're helping not just our community, but our patrol officers. Because what a lot of people look at us and see is like, oh, they're just shaking hands and kissing babies, and they're not doing actual police work.

My goal in Community Services is to make Patrol's life easier. So that's why, when I created my role, I was reviewing reports that Patrol was writing. I was seeing, where are the issues, and how can I reach out to that person who keeps calling us to get them to stop calling us? And sometimes that's, "Hey, call me instead, because this is not an emergency." So once upon a time, I had one woman that left me 300 text messages, and I was like, "Okay, at least she didn't call Patrol 10 times that night."

So it's the way that you look at it. And I know with how I keep stats that we are seeing a decrease in those repeat individuals. So I know that what I'm doing is helping Patrol. I go down to their roll calls. I say, "Hey, you got any people I should be looking at? Is there anything that you guys need from me? What's easier for you?" And I'm also taking all the resources that I'm learning about in the community and I've turned them into pamphlets. So then that way, officers who are actually on the scene with people, they have a reference point that they can say, "Here, call this person." They don't have to do research, they don't have to look for it, and they're able to provide that immediate resource to reroute people from calling police when police aren't the answer for that problem.

Jennifer Donelan

39:53

I'm sitting over here beaming with pride. The future looks good. When I hear a young officer like you, just so engaged and so committed and so enthusiastic and passionate about what you're doing and the job, it really does give hope for the future. So speaking about the future, I want to end on some words of wisdom from you, and I'm going to take it back to that recruitment theme just because it's so important and you came into the job at such a critical time. Do you have any last words of advice to leaders in law enforcement in terms of their recruitment of young officers, college students? Any words of wisdom that you've gathered over your experiences?

Shauna Moller

40:38

What I'd say is you have to make your department stand out for how you're treating the community, the culture that you're building inside and outside, and just making all of your officers feel appreciated. There's always going to be the tension in terms of salary and benefits and take-home cars, and there's only so much that you can do with that where it's not going to keep that retention usually. There's always going to be someone who's out there that's better. It's what you're doing internally, and making sure that your officers are appreciated, you're doing all the training and education, and everyone is being held accountable, and the standards across the board are the same. There's nothing worse than seeing someone who is getting paid the same as you do nothing while you're putting a ton of work into it. And that's for any job.

So when you have these people that are coming out of college and they have all this education, but you have the 15-year veteran on the department, 20-year veteran on the department, it's like, "Ah, he's just

the new guy.” What are they telling you? They’re bringing all this education from college. Listen to them. We are learning about all these different techniques and policies that are being studied, and they’re being studied for a reason. So how can we change our status quo inside to see if that’s going to work for us? I’m not saying change everything, but taking the new point of view from newer officers and just testing it out, seeing if it’s going to work for your department. Every department’s different, but changing those things to make sure that your department is functioning properly and everyone feels like they have a role, I think, is what really keeps people going. That’s what builds the loyalty, and then the family comes after that.

Jennifer Donelan

42:35

So insightful, so critical, so beautifully said. Thank you for that. And I did want to reflect on something you mentioned earlier during our conversation, where your department is really consciously and aggressively trying to change culture. And it’s not just in police departments. As you were describing, that it’s harder to get the younger officers engaged and eliminating that gap between the young and the older, more veteran officers, etc., and just changing that culture, where you hang out after work and all of that, you’re seeing that across the board in public safety. The traditions are lost their weight over time. So the fact that you guys are making a concerted effort to bring that back, to bring that camaraderie back, and that culture of family back to your department, I think that’s going to pay off huge dividends for you all. I’m going to be really interested to see the benefits in a year or two.

Shauna Moller

43:27

We’re definitely hoping. Again, in terms of how everyone’s going to fit in together, it’s, did you pick the right place? With law enforcement, we all relatively do the same jobs, but where you feel at home is what is ultimately going to keep you there.

Jennifer Donelan

43:47

Master Police Officer Moller, I could not have said that better myself. So if people want to talk to you some more or pick your brain some more, can they contact you? And if so, how?

Shauna Moller

44:00

Yep. So, I’m available. The best way to reach me is through my email. It’s going to be msmoller@manassasva.gov. So that’s S-M-O-L-L-E-R at Manassas, M-A-N-A-S-S-A-S, V-A dot gov.

Jennifer Donelan

44:18

Thank you so much for that. I wish you the best of luck with your career. I don’t mean to jinx anything, but if I were a betting woman, I think one day it’s going to be Chief Moller, so I’ll be excited when that day comes. Thank you so for joining us here on The Beat, Master Police Officer Moller.

Shauna Moller

44:34

Thank you for having me. I had a great time.

Jennifer Donelan

44:36

Thank you. And thank you, everyone, for joining us here on The Beat. We'll see you next time.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Closing

44:41

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Voiceover: *The Beat* Disclaimer

45:31

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