

TAKOMA PARK POLICE DEPARTMENT - GENERAL ORDERS



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Authority: Chief Thomas W. Anderson		Dated: December 04, 2001
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01 Purpose: To provide specific guidelines on the behavior expected of all police department employees.

02 Policy: Few areas generate such a number of complaints as discourtesy. While courtesy may seem minor compared to issues of honesty, use of force and other serious matters, the time and ill will generated by complaints of discourtesy cannot be overestimated.

Practicing courtesy is a way the Department earns the respect and support of others. Without the support of Takoma Park residents and officials, it is impossible to attain police goals. Courtesy encourages cooperation and wins respect; discourtesy breeds obstruction and contempt.

Nothing which follows means that employees must sacrifice safety or become the passive recipients of endless abuse. It is recognized that employees must occasionally speak sternly to citizens in order to discharge their duties. It is also recognized that some persons may become unruly or complain no matter how much consideration or restraint is shown them.

In the final analysis, remember that it is easier and more effective for employees to explain their actions to a member of the public than it is for a superior to try to explain them in an employee's behalf. Probably the easiest way to avoid trouble is to speak to the public and co-workers as you might speak to your superiors.

03 The Value of Explanation:

A. Most people are unfamiliar with laws, police work and procedures within the criminal justice system. The most frequently overlooked courtesy is the simple act of explaining what you are doing. When people are ignorant of the reason for police actions, they may assume police employees are acting out of ignorance, arrogance or whim. Such assumptions almost always provoke suspicion, anger, or reduced willingness to cooperate.

B. Occasionally an employee may not be free to explain his/her actions because to do so might violate a confidence or interfere with a crisis situation, but such situations should be rare. A traffic violator should not be lectured; the officer can explain the violation if the person is at all receptive.

C. If an officer is asked to act contrary to law or policy, he or she should not only refuse, but also attempt to explain the law or policy. Any person who is subjected to a delay, a field interrogation or a warrant check should be given an explanation whenever possible.

04 Listening:

A. Active listening is work. It calls for patience, avoidance of interruption, and for putting other concerns aside so as to concentrate on what is being expressed by another. An employee may do “pretend” listening while his/her mind is occupied elsewhere, but few persons will be fooled. “Pretend” listening has an element of contempt, because it shows that one person does not value another enough to listen to him or her. Allowing unnecessary interruptions also implies contempt, for the same reason.

B. The complaint most frequently received by any police department is that an employee did not pay someone the courtesy of listening. Such complaints will describe an employee’s behavior as “cold”, “hard”, “mean”, “arrogant”, “uncaring”, “obnoxious” and so on. A complainant will say an employee “treated me like a criminal”, “refused to listen to me” or “cut me off when I tried to explain”. Such complaints come from victims and violators alike. What they all have in common is that the complainant was not actively listened to.

C. It is true that some persons may confuse an explanation with an argument. However, it is also true that in many cases the employee simply did not want to take the time to listen, or felt that listening would be interpreted as weakness. While circumstances may not always allow police employees to listen at great length, it is important to remember that time spent listening is usually more productive than time spent talking. Whenever possible, police employees both in the station and outside it will:

1. Actively listen to another’s view, without interruption if possible, and
2. Acknowledge that the person has been heard. The best way to show that another has been heard is to re-state the other’s point, as in “So you feel you got this ticket because the meter isn’t working.” It is always possible to listen to, and acknowledge, what is being said without approving its content or excusing the behavior being discussed.

05 Procedures:

A. Introductions: Whenever practical, employees are expected to identify themselves by title and name at the start of any public contact. Greetings such as “good morning” or “good afternoon” should be included whenever appropriate. Remember that greetings are the first and best opportunity to set the tone of any encounter. The more cordial (or at least neutral) an encounter is kept; the more the participants can concentrate on the business at hand.

B. Tone of Voice: Too often tone of voice is left to chance. Employees should be aware of voice tone and use it to their advantage, by not portraying sarcasm, contempt, anger or other emotions that are likely to provoke opposition.

C. Voice Volume: There are situations, of course, when the voice must be raised. However, often the best response to the loud voice of another is a very quiet reply. It preserves a clear difference between the behavior of the police employee and the behavior of the person with whom he or she is dealing.

D. Forms of Address: Employees should not address citizens by first names unless it is clearly appropriate. Nicknames or diminutives (Skippy, Pops, Junior, etc.) are never appropriate. Employees are encouraged to use “Mister” and “Ms.” whenever a person is addressed by the last name. If the last name is not known, employees will use “Sir” or “Ma’am”.

E. Body Language: While employees must often assume stances for safety during encounters with the public, care must be taken to avoid needlessly provoking negative reactions, as in resting a hand on the butt of a holstered gun or gesturing with a nightstick or flashlight. The display of a friendly or at least neutral facial expression is encouraged as an effective way to gain cooperation.

F. Crowding: Most persons are threatened or offended by intrusion into their personal space...the area immediately around their bodies...unless they have consented. Employees must restrict this practice to: physical arrest, separating opponents, weapons frisk, seizing evidence, or controlling a potential disturbance. Crowding may only be done for a specific, legitimate reason, not unconsciously or for merely personal reasons.

G. Personal Opinions: Employees must never publicly express their personal opinions on the importance of a complaint, the worth of any citizen, the performance of public officials and employees or similar inappropriate subjects. Employees must guard against expressing such opinions through facial expression, tone of voice, body language or similar conduct.

H. Demeaning Remarks: A remark or form of address that ridicules a citizen or fellow employee, expresses contempt or is calculated to anger, is never appropriate.

06 Provocation by Others:

A. Persons often direct anger and frustration against police employees, and to reply is a constant temptation. However, there is nothing to gain from replying to insults and much to lose. It is important to preserve a clear distinction between the proper behavior of employees and the offensive behavior of others.

B. The best way to handle an insult is either to ignore it or to quietly point out that, you are not insulting him or her. Focus on completing the business at hand. If an employee is being given information in an insulting manner, the employee can concentrate as much as possible on collecting the information. If a request or question is asked in an insulting manner, the employee should react to the request and ignore the insult. Police are not required to correct merely obnoxious behavior, and it is futile to try.

C. When insulting behavior by a citizen may incite public disturbance or become a challenge to an officer's authority, calm and careful warnings are then appropriate so the citizen has a chance to moderate the behavior before arrest becomes necessary. This is an important test of an officer's ability to control a situation while controlling him or herself. The officer must not allow emotions to aggravate the situation or become an issue in later court or other proceedings. Whether handling a call for service, making an arrest, investigating a crime, or collecting evidence, officers must not allow themselves to be diverted from duty by obnoxious behavior. This does not mean the employee must always accept every abuse short of an offense that calls for an arrest. If a delay is possible, the employee may elect to break contact with the offending citizen if he or she refuses to moderate behavior. Such action must be clearly explained to the citizen, as should the means to remedy it.