

Salisbury Domestic Violence Officer Takes on Tough Role

The Daily News

Published: April 18, 2008 10:36 am

By Angeljean Chiaramida
Staff writer

SALISBURY — Police officer Jim Leavitt has had some rough assignments, such as being a 17-year military medic who did a tour of duty in Iraq two years ago.

But Leavitt is taking on another tough role in Salisbury. He was appointed recently as the department's domestic violence officer; he had already established new procedures he and the department are hoping will serve those who suffer violent domestic situations in town.

According to police Chief David L'Esperance, Leavitt has the background needed to handle what is one of the town's most significant and difficult problems, domestic violence. Leavitt's medical training, his ability to work with those under severe stress makes L'Esperance believe Leavitt will be a good fit for the difficult, and sometimes thankless, role.

Responding to domestic violence is one of the most basic parts of police work, Leavitt said. It's taught in formal police training everyday somewhere, and it's nothing to be taken casually. The re-organization within the department to respond more effectively to one of society's most insidious problems isn't lip service, he said.

"This department as a whole is dedicated to making this work," Leavitt said in an interview yesterday. "And it's dedicating resources to make it work. We take domestic abuse very seriously here."

A full-time officer, Leavitt will respond to all domestic violence calls on his shift. And if a serious domestic violence situation presents itself when he's off-duty, his fellow officers can call him in if they think it's warranted. The off-duty call means overtime, Leavitt said, but L'Esperance has committed department resources to cover that when necessary.

Leavitt is also Salisbury's liaison to the Domestic Abuse High Risk Task Force that meets monthly to discuss difficult cases of domestic violence. The task force formulates protection strategies on a case by case basis that are followed by each of the many agencies that are part of the Task Force, he said, including local police departments. The Task Force is coordinated by the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, headquartered in Newburyport.

Leavitt has also revitalized communications with the crisis center. If called for off-hour domestic violence emergencies, Leavitt said the center will respond by sending personnel to Salisbury to help victims of domestic violence no matter the hour.

"When there's an emergency situation, we can take care of the victims to an extent," Leavitt said. "We can get them away from the situation, make arrests, get them to medical treatment and even do the paper work to get an emergency restraining order when the courthouse is closed and on weekends. I don't want to make it sound as if we're insensitive, because we're not, but a lot of the times victims need the kind of comforting that trained advocates can provide. The center has again promised to send advocates here when we call."

The definition of domestic violence isn't limited to just a husband being abusive to a wife, he said; it includes abuse between any type of family or domestic relationship — violence between siblings, spouses, those cohabiting, parents

toward children or children toward parents or grandparents, he said. Domestic violence also includes violence between individuals who are dating.

Since taking over the role of domestic violence officer, Leavitt has analyzed the way Salisbury records and categorizes domestic abuse incidents, L'Esperance said. What Leavitt found is that some police calls that should have been recorded as domestic abuse cases were being recorded under other categories.

All that's changing, he said. When his shift begins, Leavitt reviews all calls, and after reading incident reports, makes adjustments if necessary.

What that means, L'Esperance said, is that Salisbury's domestic violence statistics could jump in number. But that's OK, L'Esperance said yesterday. The goal is to protect victims and respond to them the best way possible.

For more information on domestic violence or to report an incident or contact Leavitt, contact the Salisbury Police Department at 978-465-3121. In emergencies, dial 911.