



A Smarter Solution

As I browse these facebook groups, I keep hearing about concerns about rising street crime and lack of security in downtown St. Johnsbury. I read reports of groups of intoxicated people continually in public parks or streets causing disturbances. People report being afraid to go downtown and experience all that wonderful community has to offer in terms of businesses and events. Much has been said about a recent suggestion to spend \$25,000 on an outside agency to provide extra police services. However, I would argue that short term proposals like this are not going to help address the underlying issue. We need to build capacity and provide long term structural change. This crisis did not happen overnight. It cannot be solved overnight. It is going to take help from several different directions to address it. I've thought about this type of issue through my experience as a law enforcement officer. My ideas are not perfect and cannot solve all the problems, but I propose a 3 point suggestion (**Build, Stop [The Revolving Door] and Heal**) to get the discussion ball rolling.

1. BUILD.

The 2020 St. Johnsbury Town Report listed 12 full time and 2 part timer officers. The police department website presently lists 9 officers (11 excluding the resigned chief and one on leave). However, the census data from 2020-2025 for St. Johnsbury town (admittedly not the former village that the police cover) shows population remained relatively flat during this timeframe. The reported disorder suggests that total police headcount needs to significantly increase, not stay the same or decrease. Once it rises to appropriate levels, we need to recognize that future cuts are unwise. Given the disorder reported on these forums, it is going to take multiple officers to respond to these types of incidents. If a person is taken into custody, this further strains operations as now other officers are needed to deal with calls for service while the arresting officer is at the office doing paperwork. I personally know several St. Johnsbury Police officers. They are skilled professionals who do their best but are not miracle workers. They need help. As the incidents of disorder and violence become more common, we should be concerned with the trauma and stress being experienced by those we ask to protect us.

This is all the more evident with the Town Manager's statement reporting half a dozen officer injuries and the police department being inundated with calls keeping them from proactive patrol. **Hiring needs to be an immediate priority, with special attention given to pre-certified officers that can lateral in from other agencies and start as soon as practicable.** Yes, this will be expensive. A town should be well compensating those who are willing to risk their life and limb for our safety. It is also time to do an emergency review of staff compensation to determine if they are being paid commensurate with what they are being asked to do. A community asking far more of their police than surrounding towns likely will have to pay more than those competing departments. Perhaps the \$25,000 could be spent as a first step towards raising compensation rates for the loyal officers presently there or allowing

the staff to work overtime to address these issues? **This may be costly compared to a short term bandaaid fix, but a funded, experienced and staffed police department will pay big dividends in the long run and have a greater chance at addressing structural issues.**

2. STOP [THE REVOLVING DOOR].

The town manager's report stated that 18 people made up 131 calls to the police department. This coincides with a concept in criminology called "The Power Few(1)" in which a small number of people or places produce a wildly large and disproportionate amount of a particular trait. One method of attacking these hot spots is targeted long term uniformed street patrols which would aggressively deter or address disorder. A short term surge will just stop this temporarily. You need high staffing in the long term, with the right leadership. Anyways, it has been found in the past that certainty of apprehension is often a larger deterrent than a hypothetical severe punishment. The National Institute of Justice even stated (2) "**The certainty of being caught is a vastly more powerful deterrent than the punishment.**"

Once we commit to hiring and retaining police staff to a level that allows frequent proactive policing of high risk areas, those involved in crime would likely see that there is less benefit to engaging in crime in these places. This would likely change behavior and prevent crime. I see a lot of comments on here denigrating the State Attorney (said comments are unwarranted in my opinion, as we are profoundly fortunate to have a very skilled State Attorney leading that office and her talented staff) or Court. But here is the thing: judges are required to follow the law in setting bail or conditions of release. They are simply calling balls and strikes with the law as written. **This is a legislative issue.**

Once recidivist offenders are in the court system, judges should be given greater leeway to hold people with repeat pending court dockets or difficulty following conditions of release. Setting bail absolutely has a part to play in ensuring people show up to court, but it also has a role in protecting the public as well from people accused of violent felonies or repeat crimes. Sadly, sometimes the only way to get somebody to access services or become substance free is a period of incarceration. For people that will not change and choose to repeatedly violate the law this should be an option. I think the legislature should look into this and determine a more balanced way of protecting the public from repeat offenders. Town residents should be demanding proposals from legislators as to what changes they will propose to the law when the legislature reopens. **Ask for specifics. Ask for commitments.**

3. HEAL.

One of my biggest gripes is in Vermont we do a terrible job of getting help rapidly to those who actually want to change themselves for the better. I still remember years ago a man coming to me late on the midnight shift and asking me for help getting into rehab/detox. I was unable to do so, despite spending time calling various phone numbers and he left without assistance. By the next morning, he was actively back to criminal activity and had no interest in getting clean. I consider this one of my greatest failures even though I know I did my best.

We need to recognize that for many people experiencing addiction, the window of clarity is often very slim and can come at any point. **When somebody wants help getting clean now, they need it now. Therefore we should provide it as soon as practicable, not on bankers hours.** We need to increase capacity for detox services. More critically, I'd like to see the state fund a service where residents would have the ability to call a certain number

day or night and be transported as soon as practicable (preferably within hours) to centralized facility for detox, medical assessment and referral for long term services, job skills, housing help, etc. (We already have a transport capability as the Sheriffs departments transport mental health patients and can easily do the same here if needed). To ensure that those using this are serious, each Vermonter should be limited to the use of this service only a couple times and strict behavioral rules would be enforced. **This would be expensive, but I'd rather my tax dollars go towards helping people who want the help to achieve their goals of sobriety than watching people tumble down the path of addiction.** Not every Vermonter with a substance abuse issue is involved in criminal activity and we need to provide a pathway for help outside of the justice system.

I remember a man struggling with addiction telling me that going to a facility was the worst thing he ever did because he was surrounded by people required to be there under a court order and did not want to get well. Then he says he doesn't want to go back to a rehab. That was quite shocking to me but sadly made sense. I think we would do well to build out a separate system for folks who voluntarily want to seek help, hopefully prior to their involvement with the justice system. Yes, it would be very expensive at the state level but the amount of money (and lives) this prevention strategy would save would likely be immense. Maybe our state can become a leader in healing.

Look, I know this group of ideas is not perfect. It will be expensive, both for the town and the state. The best long term solution also includes continuing to build our local economy and business sectors. I am not an expert in that. I am just a police officer who recognizes we cannot only arrest our way out of this problem. **But strong police departments over the long term and leveraging the justice system is a huge part of the solution. While we're doing that, lets build out treatment capacity and heal those that want help. If we all work together great things can happen.** Maybe that person who has been arrested several times comes up to you years later and thanks you and says you saved their life. That is worth it, in my opinion.

One final suggestion: court is open to all and the schedule is public. Sit in on a few days of Monday arraignments or busy hearings another day of the week. Watch and see what is happening and how the state attorney is doing their best to represent the people. See how the police are protecting you. Learn about crime trends. Ask your local police department to do a ride along. Many agencies will allow it and you may see a whole different side of this issue.

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- 1) Sherman, L. (2007) "The power few: experimental criminology and the reduction of harm." J Exp Criminology 3:299-321.
- 2) National Institute of Justice (2016) "Five things about deterrence."
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