

Robert Pitman, Chief of Police with the village of Homer

2020 has been a heck of a year. With COVID-19 pandemic, the mandates or executive orders from the governor, protests, police reform, staffing and recruitment issues, and maintaining the services to the community with 50% of the staff at times.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic started in February 2020, when the pandemic started to go worldwide. Locally, law enforcement and emergency personnel had meetings about what to expect. At that time, we had no idea how many people were going to be sick or going to die, but we had to prepare anyway. We discussed how we had to change doing things such as death investigations, where we were going to keep the deceased if many in our community were going to die from it.

We discussed what kind of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) we needed. We bought a thermometer to take people's temperatures. We had the rubber gloves but not the N95 masks. We needed those to keep our employees healthy. A lot of contractors, Elizabeth Brewster House and also TLC ambulance donated masks to us, we were very grateful for that. And I needed Tyvek suits. Some neighboring police agencies gave us some. I tried to become creative, I talked to Homer Men & Boys to get rubber rain suits, as an alternative to Tyvek suits, because they form a barrier and can be wiped down. Also, hand sanitizer was hard to come by, and the Chlorox wipes. I went to the grocery stores early Saturday mornings to buy whatever I could. We were provided hand sanitizer by New York State, the Cortland Beer Company and Beek and Skiff and were extremely grateful.

Then, in March, almost within a week, it seemed everything closed: schools, businesses, everything. The police department did not close, though, we stayed open to provide services. During the lockdown, we still had a job to do, work did not slow down, it was just been busy in different ways. We changed the way we did things though to limit our chances of exposure. We had more domestic calls because people are home more and confined. We talked to the people outside of their homes, but if we had to, there was PPE for one person in the car to enter when necessary. Travel was lighter, so the accidents dropped some, the first two months. And we did fewer traffic stops for issues like loud mufflers, to lessen the exposure of our employees. We

still checked on businesses and properties to make sure people were not breaking in; with businesses being closed it provides more opportunity for people to steal. I have maintained a lot of contact with the business owners during the pandemic, many have my direct number here at the department. In all the cases, if something concerned a business in the village, I would call and talk to the owner. The relationship between the business owners and the police department is good.

Almost all the annual of the events in the village, except for the Memorial Day service were cancelled. Events like Magic on Main, Holiday in Homer, Homecoming and the Winterfest (2021) were all canceled.

Here, at the department, we locked the front door, so people could not walk in freely anymore during business hours. They could only come in if it was an extreme emergency. This was necessary because it is tight quarters in here. The department and police cars were to be wiped down at the beginning and end of each shift. I also limited time off for full time officers and the number of part-time officers during the first few months, so they could stay safe and be a backup in case a full-time officer fell ill. Fortunately, no officers got sick.

Another big change was that arraignments (going to court) were done virtually, not in person anymore. We set up a camera hooked up to a computer in one of the rooms here and did arraignments virtually. Fingerprinting and photographing, pre-COVID, is done in the jail. We continued to do that but vetted beforehand if people were possibly sick or had been exposed because we did not want to introduce it into the jail. If they were, we had the person quarantine and waited two weeks. During the pandemic, we did not make a lot of arrests, 2 or 3, which was good, so it was not a big problem.

The governor implemented many executive orders, but it was hard to find out what they really meant or how they were to be enforced, or who was to enforce them. For example, in the beginning, it sounded like the police were going to issue tickets for not wearing masks. But that was misinformation. We were not able to do this by the way the order was written. So, there was confusion. People would call the tip hotline at the Pause New York site, to turn in businesses that they thought were not in compliance with the mask mandates, I looked into the

complaints and that was not the case. There was even a call about a police officer not wearing a mask in a business, and the video showed at the business along with talking to the business owner revealed that no police officer entered the business at all. Also, people were not aware of the details of the order, for example, people with a medical condition who could not tolerate a mask, or children 2 and younger, did not have to wear one. Another challenge was that complaints about people not wearing a mask would be called in from a gas station, and by the time we were there, those people had already left. The order put a lot on the kids behind the counter at the gas station having to tell an adult they had to wear a mask, who at times would get angry with them. We had two or three a month like these. People have become more bitter, not as patient. Probably because of being cooped up or, the people who did not believe in the governor's mandates or orders and had to be told they needed to be in compliance with them. This added to the work being harder.

Then in June 2020, a lot changed for our department and law enforcement following the death of George Floyd. There were protest all over the country, including here in our village where between 300 – 400 people protested. The social distancing was a challenge for the department during this. To my knowledge, luckily, nobody got sick.

The governor also put some reforms for us in the form of an executive order. He wanted us to meet with the people of the community to talk about how they wanted to change the police department and come up with a “plan” to do so that we had to submit to Albany by April 1, 2021. We always have room for change or improvement, but it was not good time to meet in person because “How can we meet when we have this pandemic?”. However, we did meet in person a couple of times, keeping a social distance, but then in the Fall, when the cases started to increase again, the meetings went virtual. We eventually had virtual forums that resulted in a plan that was formulated with the community. The plan was how the people in the community wanted the police department to operate. The forums let them know and they already liked how we operated before, so we did not have many changes. One change was that we now have more often “Coffee with the chief”, a chance for the public to meet the police and to give feedback. And another change is that trustees of the board now also interview new candidates in the hiring process.

My skills in multitasking expanded this past year. Two officers left the department in March and June of 2020, putting the staffing at 50%. Hiring and training take a lot of time. We can't just hire someone and send them out to serve the people. We have to send them to training, the academy as well as field training. All to make sure they are the right fit for Homer. I want the right person working here. I did most of this besides my regular job as a chief and the extra work on patrol. Add to that all the new COVID-19 regulations and measures, it was hectic. And it is hard to find personnel, due to the demonizing of police officers in the press and by politicians. There is no doubt in my mind that there are bad police officers, but they have painted us all as bad. Homer is a great community and I know they don't view us as bad, but the negative images in the media I think have an impact on people wanting to join police departments. We did hire a full-time officer in May and then another in July but had another left in September, leaving us short again.

This past year with the pandemic and everything else has been trying but we are making our way through it. The officers of the Homer Police Department will be wearing a pin on their uniforms that honors the victims of the pandemic worldwide, as well as the essential workers. It stands for all we went through as a country, and as a world.