

Cheektowaga Police chief leaving after 33 years for North Carolina

 news.wbfo.org/post/cheektowaga-police-chief-leaving-after-33-years-north-carolina

By Marian Hetherly • Jan 14, 2020

Cheektowaga Police Chief David Zack is flying south to become chief of the Asheville, NC Police Department. Zack is retiring on Feb. 3 after 33 years of service with Cheektowaga Police, the last nine as chief.

Zack came up through the ranks of Cheektowaga Police. He has been elected president of the Erie County Chiefs of Police Association, president of New York State Association of Chiefs of Police and a member of the Board of Governors of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Chief David Zack in the lobby of the Cheektowaga Police Department.

Credit Marian Hetherly / WBFO News

He has received a number of awards for new initiatives over the years, but perhaps his legacy in Western New York earned him the National Alliance for Mental Illness President's Award. Cheektowaga Police created the first Crisis Intervention Teams in Erie County, now a staple for handling mental health calls across the region.

"We were seeing many more calls that were mental health-related or had a mental health subplot to them," Zack said, "and what really got the ball rolling for us, we were dealing with a young man who we had arrested many, many times. We had been to his home dozens and dozens of times for calls of service."

Zack said the young man, about 17 or 18 years old at the time, was causing all types of disruptions in the neighborhood.

"He was walking in peoples' homes, he was aggressive in some respects to some of his neighbors and it was just creating a lot of concern, where I literally had 20 neighbors ask for a private meeting with me to say, 'What are we going to do about this?'" he said.

After looking into the teen's background, police found he was getting picked up by other departments and was the target of violence, as well.

"I believe at one time, we had almost 80 documented contacts with this young man," Zack said. "So it became readily apparent that after all of the arrests, all of the intervention, nothing was changing. That's when we made the determination we weren't going to arrest our way out of this problem. So that's when we started taking a much deeper look into what police agencies were doing across the country to address issues related to mental health."

In 2013, Cheektowaga Police became the first in Western New York to train their patrol officers in crisis intervention. They and Crisis Services - which has been training law enforcement about mental illness for years - created a CIT program tailored to Erie County road patrols. Later it was revised to pilot at the Erie County Holding Center, the first jail to adopt the change.

There is increasing evidence that offenders with special needs - like a mental illness - respond better to crisis intervention teams than traditional policing. Hundreds of Western New York law enforcement are now CIT-trained.

Zack's first day on the job in North Carolina is Feb. 4. No word on who will become chief in Cheektowaga.

Tags: