



IACLEA Agency Highlight: 2017

The Virginia Commonwealth University Police Department is the largest, campus, law enforcement agency in Virginia and utilizes “all-out community policing” practices. VCU is located in Virginia’s capital city of Richmond; the university, which includes academic and medical campuses, has more than **50,000** students, faculty and staff. The medical campus is home to the Richmond region’s only Level-1 trauma center at the VCU Medical Center. Because of the size and scope of the university’s operations, VCUPD utilizes municipal-style organization and tactics to face unique challenges in an urban environment.

Growth & Expansion: In October 2016, the department moved into a new headquarters facility halfway between the campuses, which includes an on-site firing range in the basement. VCUPD plans to expand its jurisdiction downtown where students, staff and faculty reside. VCU blends seamlessly into the rest of the city with university property, public parks, private residences and commercial establishments all located within the core campus geography. Seven new officer positions were added to the budget in 2016.



Chief John A. Venuti

**Institution type: Four-year,
public university**

**Sworn/armed officers:
99**

**Private & hospital security:
137**



96.4%

**Of VCU’s students, faculty and staff
feel “safe” or “very safe” on campus.**

(Spring 2017, Perception of Safety Survey)

In fall 2016, VCUPD became the first, campus law enforcement agency in the country to implement the **You Have Options Program** (YHOP) for sexual assault investigations. Originated by the Ashland Police Department in Oregon, the program lets survivors choose how much information they give to police about a sexual assault. Interviews are trauma-informed and give survivors control over the pace of an investigation; detectives can use information to link serial perpetrators. The department has had a **69%** increase in reports since Aug. 1, 2016 and is working with YHOP administrators on a national database.

VCUPD has a robust patrol and investigative divisions and specialty positions such as a sworn, victim/witness specialist.



Patrol officers wear **body-worn video cameras** to increase transparency with the community and the chief has implemented LGBTQIA+ and transgender sensitivity training to enhance diversity training. Civilian security officers are primarily responsible for academic security. Private security staffers are responsible for hospital security and mobile patrols.

VCUPD conducts a biannual “perception of safety” survey to guide the department’s priorities and to provide indispensable feedback on the department’s effectiveness. In spring 2017, **96.4%** of VCU students, faculty and staff surveyed feel “safe” or “very safe” on campus.

Collaborations & Outreach: Under the direction of Chief John Venuti, officers and staff always look for opportunities to “inform, educate and involve members of the community.” Everyone is encouraged to pursue unprecedented levels of community engagement, such as participation in fundraisers for charities and partnerships with Greek and other student organizations for charitable and educational activities. Engagement efforts run the gamut from attendance at neighborhood association meetings to speaking at open forums for students on a variety of topics. Rarely is a request for collaboration or involvement turned down.

As part of a career development program, officers seeking advancement within the department are required to meet specific fitness standards and to execute a community outreach project to engage the VCU community and raise the reputation of the department. For example, during the 2016 holiday season, officers, dispatchers and staff worked together to collect nearly **700** gifts for a local school and children’s hospital.

VCU Police educates the community on good safety habits and partners with offices across the university; the goal is to reduce crime through the natural result of community policing. For example, VCUPD and partners buy U-locks for students to secure bikes on campus. This modest investment saves money, and manpower, by preventing hundreds of bike larcenies and getting students in the habit of protecting their property. As a result, police have seen a **21%** reduction in bike larcenies.

An external relations officer works with local residents to build relationships in nearby neighborhoods and to ease the traditional tensions that challenge all schools. The officer attends regular meetings of neighborhood associations and serves as a liaison between the school, community and landlords. These efforts have created a safer and healthier living and working environment for both students and residents. In addition, VCU Police created Party Smart, an [online system](#) where students can register off-campus parties. Should police receive a noise complaint about the party, students will get text message warnings before an officer visits.

VCU Police works closely, and frequently, with the Richmond Police Department to prevent and respond to crime on and around VCU’s campuses and to collaborate on investigations and patrols. VCUPD also enlists the help of the Virginia State Police; VSP diverts interstate patrol routes through campus for the first few weeks of school when the community most wants to see a visible police presence. Whether there’s an incident that needs immediate attention, or a program that requires months of planning, officers and staff are highly responsive and proactive in partnerships.

VCU Police routinely works with VCU's Division of Student Affairs, Equity and Access Services, University Relations, Athletics, the VCU Medical Center, Facilities Management, the Division of Community Engagement and Parking and Transportation, just to name a few.

Embracing Training, Technology & Innovation: With 99 sworn officer positions, VCUPD is the only campus law enforcement agency in the Commonwealth of Virginia to operate its own, state-certified criminal justice academy. Police instructors conduct a 23-week academy to address the unique challenges of policing in VCU's urban environment. The department also conducts in-service and specialty training for local agencies. Courses include bike school, physical fitness training and testing, crowd management training and active shooter training.

Chief Venuti is always looking for ways to connect with a younger demographic. In order to open a new channel of communication with the community, VCUPD brought the LiveSafe smart phone app to campus in 2013 and was the first campus law enforcement agency to implement the app. As of March 2017, VCU has more than 16,000 registered users. People can send in text messages, photos, videos and audio files directly to police, 24/7.

In 2012, with the support of the university's administration, and in partnership with Cisco and Sycom, VCUPD replaced an aging security camera system with a robust, high-definition system. At the time, photos were grainy and unreliable; there was no central portal for dispatchers and officers to access footage in a timely manner. The new system, with hundreds of cameras on both campuses, provides clear, usable, video and photographic evidence of incidents.



As of March 2017, the system has contributed usable evidence in cases more than **1,500** times. More recently, in 2015, the department implemented Axon body-worn video cameras for patrol officers to increase transparency with the community. The department has had a **33%** decrease in complaints against officers since implementation.

A full-time, civilian public information officer handles media relations, communications projects and social media for VCUPD. The PIO works across the agency, and the university, to generate content for social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Articles, photos, videos and safety messages educate the community on personal safety and provide updates on programs and initiatives to the public.

Chief John Venuti is always willing to speak with other campus law enforcement agencies about the programs, services and technology VCU Police provides. Contact him directly by email: javenuti@vcu.edu.