

SELECT BOARD COMMITTEE ON POLICING REFORMS

WALK AND TALK UNIT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who are the officers of the Walk and Talk Unit?

- Officer Tim Stephenson – also Crisis Negotiator, Advanced Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) trained, Graffiti Investigator, BHS RoundTable Liaison, Past Recipient of the Brookline Teen Center Impact Award
- Officer Kristin Healy – also LGBTQ+ Liaison, Advanced CIT trained, Rape Aggression Defense (RAD) Instructor, BPD/Youth Basketball Program, one of the Department’s liaisons to the Special Olympics (Brookline Chapter)
- Officer David Pilgrim – also Recruitment Officer, Advanced CIT trained, Website & social media, with another officer of color, initiated and is Co-Chair of the BPD Racial Progress Task Force, Bike Unit and Motorcycle Unit

While these Officers’ primary role in the Department is the Walk and Talk Unit, all three officers have many other responsibilities as indicated above.

All three officers are members of the Department’s Community Service Division in which the Walk and Talk Unit is embedded and are part of the Department’s Training Unit.

How do Walk and Talk officers spend their time?

Aside from the various extra duties listed above, these officers, like all officers are assigned a “sector” of Town for which they are responsible. Walk and Talk Officers are responsible for Brookline Housing Authority (BHA) owned properties. This means any call for service during the First Half Tour (3:30pm to 11:30pm) will be serviced by a member of the Walk and Talk Unit. Throughout their day-to-day duties, they would be responding to 911 calls, conducting follow-ups in regard to calls the Department received while they were not working, and also helping to coordinate a solution to any quality of life issues for which the BHA requests help. Walk and Talk Officers are also crucial to assisting the day-to-day operations of the Patrol Division during the early evening hours when many units are assisting on evening commute traffic posts. Walk and Talk Officers also attend community events, visit the Teen Center and support community policing efforts during their shifts town wide.

Do the Walk and Talk officers patrol the interior of BHA properties?

Walk and Talk Officers do not proactively patrol the interior of any BHA property. However, Walk and Talk Officers respond to calls and complaints that may lead them to the interior of a BHA property the same way any call to the Police Department could lead the officer to private

property. Absent an on-going investigation into reported criminal activity or requests to monitor a specific situation/quality of life concern, they do not patrol the exterior of properties either. Almost always, they are on site at BHA properties at the request of a resident or BHA staff for assistance with a specific situation or invitation, following-up on a call/report, or checking in with families/residents with whom they have ongoing positive/supportive relationships. Walk and Talk Officers may also visit properties to engage positively with residents (stopping by to say hi to kids playing outside, visit seniors sitting outside on a nice day, or playing basketball with youth they know, etc.). These activities are not forced and are not an attempt to engage in surveillance of residents in any way but rather to engage with residents and develop relationships in a positive atmosphere.

Walk and Talk officers do not use their presence in BHA properties or on the surrounding public streets for any type of surveillance, including any that would infringe on a person's right to privacy or right to be left alone or that could reasonably be considered a threat to law abiding residents. Any Brookline police officer, including Walk and Talk officers, will monitor a location at the request of BHA or a resident, for example to monitor package thefts. Any police officer, in the course of their normal duties, will keep their eyes and ears alert to situations that may become problems whether in BHA locations or any other part of Town.

In what situations do Walk and Talk Officers enter BHA properties?

Walk and Talk Officers primarily respond to calls for service and 911 calls. Both of which often require officers to enter the property where the situation causing concern is occurring or a crime is taking place. Walk and Talk Officers may also conduct what the Department calls "Park and Walks" in the neighborhoods surrounding and sometimes the courtyard or playground areas of BHA properties or in other areas of Town. The level of meaningful interaction a police department can have with their community significantly decreases while in a vehicle. Therefore we like to have our officers be approachable on foot at various times – hence the origin of their title as Walk and Talk Officers.

Why do Walk and Talk provide so many non-traditional police services to Brookline Housing Authority residents?

The Brookline Police Department has been encouraged by the Brookline community to provide non-traditional community policing services to the Town. Providing such non-traditional community policing services is an important way in which the Town of Brookline has required its police force to eliminate a culture of policing that assumes that the police and community have an adversarial relationship. Walk and Talk has never been intended to replace other services or supports available to residents but rather to augment those services and supports and be part of the important community safety net. Housing managers work during the day and are not available in the evening and on weekends; that is why Walk and Talk works the hours they do.

If a resident anywhere in Town needs assistance or support, the Brookline Police Department tries to assist them. It is the right thing to do and is not exclusive to just BHA. For BHA, however,

we have found that having the same officers assigned for long periods of time has allowed them to develop trusting positive relationships with residents who may be particularly weary of police.

What does the day in the Life of a Walk and Talk Officer look like?

Officer David Pilgrim shared with us the following:

One of my favorite things about police work is that there is no “normal.” Every day for me is different. I try to follow similar patterns to keep myself in a routine but at the end of the day we are at the beck and call of the radio and our cell phones.

On a standard day, my shift starts at 3:30 pm. I report to my desk and speak to my coworkers and supervisors who generally have updates as well as follow-up requests to be completed. I check the various computer systems and read through reports to stay apprised of current trends and review any incidents I may have missed while not working. I then respond to any voicemails and emails I have. At this point it is usually about 4:30pm.

I then like to go get coffee and swing by some playgrounds and engage with kids and families. During the evening commute, the majority of the northside Patrol Units are occupied doing traffic posts so I like to be on the street and available to supplement patrol as needed in addition to any community policing activities that have been requested. Those can involve a request for a visit at a birthday party in the park, assisting the Rotary in handing out books to kids in BHA, meeting with a BHA manager to discuss an upcoming event or ongoing situation, stopping by the Teen Center, assisting with a vaccination clinic at BHA senior properties, or attending a community event somewhere in Town.

Throughout my evening, I make sure to visit each BHA property. If I see people out and about, I will wave or engage them in brief conversation. If there are children out and about, they may want to look inside the police car or turn the lights and siren on or otherwise satisfy their curiosity. Residents will almost always engage with me voluntarily. I do not push conversations or interactions beyond a wave or cordial hello if a resident seems uninterested.

By this point, it is usually around 7pm and I will head back to the office to complete any follow-ups that were not done earlier and then I will eat dinner.

From about 8pm to 10pm, I drive around the town as a whole and will assist patrol with any calls I happen to be nearby. Prior to the end of my shift at 11:30 pm, I will complete any reports, do some website updates, and ensure that all my follow-ups are in order.

The reality is if I am not being called to a BHA property by a resident or a manager, I am not spending very much time there. There are several ongoing quality of life issues that are brought to our attention that we will monitor without being called every day. For example, recently we were asked by BHA to mediate an ongoing noise complaint from Dummer Street residents about youth playing basketball and music in the Egmont courtyard in the evening time. The managers were unable to mediate this situation nor are they working when the noise was occurring. Myself and fellow Walk and Talk officers met with residents of both Egmont and Dummer as well as BHA

staff. The officers were able to work with both sides to reach a compromise that all parties were satisfied with and that would not have been achieved in the absence of the Walk and Talk officers and their relationships with the youth, residents, and management.

Another example that is ongoing are complaints by various area residents and BHA management about marijuana smoking and loud music at one of their property's courtyard. We are actively working with BHA management to find solutions to this problem as the smoking is not taking place in our presence or upon arrival following a dispatched call. While this is more of an ongoing BHA management issue to address with their residents, we will "walk" through the courtyard and "talk" with residents about the ongoing complaint and explain the various town by-laws and state laws regarding marijuana consumption and loud music/nuisance if needed. Because of our ongoing respectful relationships with youth and residents, these types of situations can be resolved and the resolution can be sustained to the benefit of all parties.