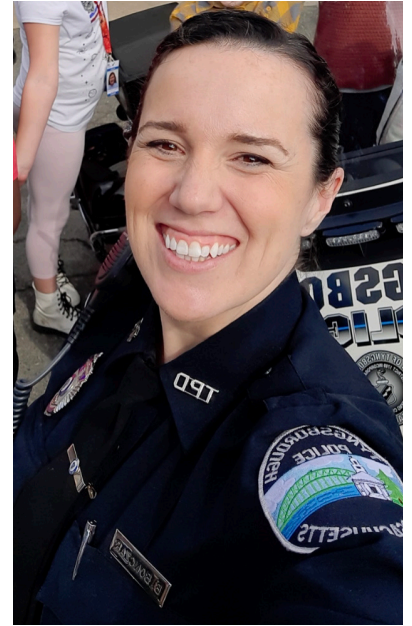


Safety and Security is Our Job: Meet Valley's New School Resource Officers

Valley Collaborative is pleased to introduce our two new School Resource Officers: Sean Dougherty (Billerica) and Bethany Bonczar (Tyngsborough). School Resource Officers or SROs are carefully selected, specifically trained law enforcement officers that have been specially trained in school-based law enforcement and crisis response using community-oriented policing concepts. We recently had the opportunity to talk to Sean and Bethany about their work at Valley, how they see their roles at their respective schools, and what they enjoy most about being part of the extended Valley family.

When the Billerica Chief of Police learned that there was an opening for an SRO at Valley, Sean Dougherty was a natural candidate. Prior to joining the Billerica Police Department in 2018, he worked for a juvenile facility and a state psychiatric facility. "The chief knew my background and suggested that I apply," says Sean. "The transition so far has been pretty smooth. Having experience in this field has definitely made it easier."

Bethany Bonczar is part of a team of officers who are assigned to the SRO division of the Tyngsborough Police Department. The officers cover seven local schools, going where they are needed. For Bethany, a typical day starts at the high school and elementary school in Tyngsborough, managing traffic. Then she's usually joined by the department's comfort and therapy dog, a four-year-old mutt named George whom the officers refer to as the Community Resource Dog. "I usually track with him in the mornings and then visit the other schools depending on where I'm needed," says Bethany.



FROM LEFT: JJ JASILEWICZ WITH OFFICER SEAN DOUGHERTY; OFFICER BETHANY BONCZAR.

Like Sean, Bethany's interest in criminal justice has a heavy emphasis on 'justice.' She comes from a family of attorneys and judges, and when she started college, she was eager to go a different route. "I felt like I'd grown up seeing what the system looks like after people get into trouble. I wanted to find the most effective way to help people," says Bethany. "That's how I got into police work."

While the SROs are trained police officers, Sean stresses that the role they play in their school-based work is different. "The biggest adjustment is that you kind of take your police hat off. You're not law enforcement, you're a friendly face," says Sean. That's because SROs utilize the principles of community-based policing, a strategy of policing that focuses on developing relationships with community members to collaboratively identify and solve problems. Explains Sean: "The goal is to make kids more comfortable around police in the long term."

For Bethany, that community-based approach means making connections with kids at Valley Elementary. In addition to visiting classrooms to provide education on issues of safety and security, Bethany has participated in Valley's running group. Last year, she and her colleague Matt Koziol, an SRO at Greater Lowell Tech, would drop by to join in Football Fridays. "We try to integrate in the community," explains Bethany.

Asked what he likes best about his new job as Valley SRO in Billerica, Sean doesn't hesitate. "The kids I get to see on a daily basis. They can really brighten up your day," says Sean. That's an opinion that Bethany shares. While Valley is just one stop on her SRO route, she says that her visits to the elementary school are her favorite part of the job. "It's so refreshing to get to hang out with the kids. And I can't speak highly enough of the staff. They really do amazing work." ■