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# MDPD Boosts Patrols at Shopping Centers During Holiday Season

*By Brian Ballou*

Pickpockets, purse snatchers, and car burglars know that the holiday season brings out shoppers with large amounts of cash, and cars stuffed with gifts. These perpetrators seek easy targets such as a car left unlocked, a purse laid on a counter, or customers so enthralled with shopping that they do not pay attention to their surroundings. However, the Miami-Dade Police Department (MDPD) will have an increased presence at shopping centers this holiday season to apprehend any would-be thieves, as part of the Department's annual Holiday Crime Initiative.

"As the holidays approach, our community faces a dilemma. Many residents visit malls and shopping centers to make their holiday purchases. Unfortunately, criminals, who prey on the public, come out as well," said MDPD Director Juan J. Perez, speaking during a press conference at Palms at Town and Country shopping center.

This annual initiative brings a larger police presence to area shopping centers during the holiday season, including undercover surveillance and increased high-visibility patrols. Director Perez advised shoppers to be vigilant and to secure their valuables out-of-sight, and he had a warning for anyone who may be thinking of targeting shoppers. "This is a message for the criminals, we will be out there in full force, protecting the residents of Miami-Dade County (MDC)," he said.

Flanked by 25 members of the Department's Priority Response Team, Director Perez assured residents that officers will be on the lookout for more serious threats to



*MDPD Director Juan J. Perez addressed the news media regarding the Department's annual Holiday Crime Initiative. (Photo by Brian Ballou)*

public safety. "Make no mistake, if you are a criminal, we are out there, if you have some other ill-intended will, think twice about coming to MDC because there are some tactical folks that are here to protect. We are ready and willing to mitigate any threat," he said.

Ms. Gina Fongyee, property manager at The Palms at Town and Country, welcomed the increased police presence. "Having MDPD here, both in uniform and undercover, is very welcomed and I think the community feels most secure shopping here and they love seeing the officers," Fongyee said. "The shopping center typically gets approximately 30,000 cars visiting weekly, but that number swells by thousands during the holiday season," she said.

# MDPD Officers Lend a Hand in the Florida Panhandle After Hurricane Michael's Destruction

By Brian Ballou



*In the wake of Hurricane Michael, MDPD officers helped patch the roof and walls of a three-story home owned by the father of a first responder. (Photo by Brian Ballou)*

After Hurricane Michael tore a hole in his roof, an 85-year-old Panama City man got out his ladder, ropes, and tarp, and patched it up. But there was more extensive damage to his home. The roaring winds also ripped away a wall, exposing the bedroom and living room. It was a job beyond the capabilities of this spry, U.S. Marine Corps veteran.

Help was on the way. Twenty-seven MDPD officers traveled 600 miles to Bay County, FL to help out first responders who were so busy answering calls for service in their community, that they did not have time to fix their own homes. This was the case with the veteran's son, a local police officer. There were search and rescue efforts, road clearing, and other calls that required most first responders to work 12-18 hour shifts.

During a six-day period, the MDPD team would visit 37 homes, not just of first responders, but also the homes of elderly neighbors. The team came equipped for the job. They brought a backhoe, a "cherry picker" type crane lift, and a trailer full of lumber, saws, ropes and other equipment. Their days were long, starting at 5:00 a.m. and continuing through the evening.

When the caravan arrived at the veteran's house, it brought tears to his eyes. "He needed help, and we were glad to offer assistance to this man who had given so much

in service to our country," said MDPD Officer Julio Benavides. "I'm a Marine veteran as well, so it really hit home."

The officers used lumber and tarps to temporarily patch holes. They also chopped numerous trees into smaller pieces that had fallen in the yard. When they finished, the MDPD officers posed for pictures with the veteran and gathered around him to pray. "He was very emotional, he didn't want us to leave," Officer Benavides said.

But there were other homes to visit. Hurricane Michael tore through much of Bay County, leaving widespread destruction. Many roads were impassable, covered with fallen trees and debris. Electricity was out in most areas and a few homes were ripped from their foundation. The Bay County Sheriff's Office Headquarters was so damaged that their operation was temporarily moved to a mobile command post that was parked at a Target department store nearby.

MDPD was quick to respond to this request for help. "There's a special group of people who have taken it upon themselves to do this; they've gotten pretty good at it, so much so that when this hurricane passed in the Panhandle, there was a special request from Bay County," said MDPD Director Perez. His counterpart in Bay County, Sheriff Tommy Ford, said the MDPD officers worked "tirelessly in bad conditions" to help his deputies.

"Words are inadequate to express my appreciation to the MDPD for its quick response to Bay County after Hurricane Michael. They did for us what we did not have time to do for our own families because we were working countless hours, serving the people of Bay County," Sheriff Ford said. "I want to convey my gratitude to Director Perez for his support during this trying time."

Most of the officers who made the trip have previous experience with repairing homes and debris clearance. They helped residents in the Florida Keys after Hurricane Irma swept through there, and have responded to other natural disasters throughout the state.

Director Perez serves as president of the Police Officer Assistance Trust (POAT), a non-profit organization that assists law enforcement officers faced with natural disasters, illness, and other catastrophic circumstances. The POAT and the Police Benevolent Association sponsored the trip.

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# MDPD Officers Lend a Hand in the Florida Panhandle

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MDPD Lieutenant Brenda Ferbee-Blackshear, who oversaw the MDPD activities in Bay County, said residents thanked the officers wherever they went. When they visited an address on the southeast side of Panama City, the home of a deputy, they met his mother, who was busy gathering cherished items inside her son's damaged house. After they finished with repairs, she handed them a wooden plaque that had been on the wall for years. The plaque had praying hands depicted on

the front. The mother wrote a message on the back with a Sharpie marker, "No words can thank you enough," and she drew a heart symbol.

"We don't do this considering anything in return, we do it because we want to help out our fellow officers, help out others in need," Lieutenant Ferbee-Blackshear said. "But it does feel great when someone expresses their appreciation like that."

## MDPD Chaplains Offer Healing Words to Police Officers and Community *By Brian Ballou*



*Left to right: Chaplains Walter T. Richardson, Thomas Hanlon, Aristidis Arizi, and Dovid Weberman. (Photo by Brian Ballou)*

On a normal day inside Florida International University's Student Academic Success Center, students sit with advisors to discuss their courses, financial aid, career path, and other topics. But March 15 was not a normal day. Roughly a half-mile away, a 950 ton bridge collapsed, and for two days, the center had become the private gathering place for families of those trapped under the rubble.

MDPD Chaplains Walter T. Richardson and Aristidis Arizi were dispatched to the center to offer support to the grieving families. The chaplains walked down a long hallway to a large room where the families were gathered. The atmosphere was somber. "I told them that we would be there as long as they needed us," Chaplain Richardson,

a retired senior pastor said. He and Chaplain Arizi, then went from table to table, meeting with the families.

MDPD chaplains are non-sworn volunteers whose primary task is counseling and supporting the Department's police officers and their families. The rigors of being a police officer combined with exposure to traumatic and violent events can have a lasting effect, and police chaplains are on call around-the-clock, should an officer need one.

Police chaplains also serve a crucial support role for the MDPD's Communications Bureau, which receives more than 2.4 million calls annually through the 911 Center. With lives hanging in the balance during many calls, Communications Bureau personnel skillfully help citizens navigate through potentially fatal situations until police arrive. "They are in a

unique situation, most times they don't find out the end result of a call, they simply move on to the next call without knowing," Chaplain Richardson said.

There are ten MDPD chaplains on staff, with at least one assigned to every district and bureau. Through its recruiting efforts, the MDPD has put together a diverse team which represents various religions and its members speak multiple languages. They are pastors, rabbis, reverends, or deacons at their respective churches or synagogues.

Chaplains are skilled counselors, and their conversations with MDPD employees are confidential. When chaplains are dispatched by district commanders to neighborhoods struck by violence, they respond accordingly to provide

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## MDPD Chaplains Offer Healing Words

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spiritual support or counseling to citizens shaken by violence. Recently, a chaplain was sent to a home in an attempt to calm the relatives of a shooting victim. The rewards come through helping someone on the job no matter the situation.

Establishing trust is the crucial element to the job. Chaplain Thomas Hanlon, who is assigned to the Kendall District, and father of MDPD Assistant Director Thomas P. Hanlon said, "Sometimes the officers ask me about my son and whether I share any information with him. I tell them flatly that I don't talk with him about anything relating to my interactions with officers."

"We get notified of every critical event that involves our officers. I would say, in a good percentage of them, we request one of the chaplains to assist, and the service that they offer is something that none of us, even with all of our training, can provide," said Lieutenant Melissa Barosela of the Psychological Services Section. "Each and every one of them is so valuable to us, we can't do the job that we do without them."

Chaplains also assist in a variety of departmental

events, from awards ceremonies to dedications, such as the School Crossing Guards Annual Awards Ceremony and the new Hall of Honor dedication at MDPD Headquarters. "Obviously, the ceremonies are things that we are called upon to do and we do them gladly," said Chaplain Eddie Rivero, who is assigned to the Northwest District. "But I know that a hundred percent of us do this because we feel that we can lend some spiritual support to the men and women who wear the badge." Such support came on two of the darkest days for the Department. On September 13, 2007, Officer Jose Somohano was tragically shot and killed after making a traffic stop. On January 20, 2011, Police Officers Roger Castillo and Amanda Haworth were fatally shot while serving a warrant. The chaplains met with the families and grieving police officers. "That was a very tragic time for the Department," Chaplain Richardson said. "We as chaplains will continue to offer our spiritual support every day to the men and women of the MDPD."



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# MDPD's Arson Squad Brings Down a Multi-million Dollar Arson Ring

By Brian Ballou

For years, they committed fraud in Florida by setting fires inside rented properties from Naples to Miami and reaped millions of dollars in insurance payouts.

The leader of the arson ring was Walter Avila, a young Honduran man who used charm and promises of cash to recruit people to carry out the crimes.

Mr. Avila built his own ten-person crew, comprised mostly of undocumented people from Honduras, Colombia, and Costa Rica. He trained them how to make it appear that a candle was the cause of the fire. He bought furniture at Goodwill, Industries and even supplied fake family pictures to adorn the rented units. Some items were reused from previous arsons, such as a lamp that was placed in five different apartments. Mr. Avila started out in Naples and migrated to Miami.

The members of the ring obtained \$100,000 in insurance coverage policies for their possessions. They used aliases and often changed their dates of birth. They spread out the locations of the arsons so that authorities would not notice patterns or recognize any of them. Despite all the attempts to cover their tracks, investigators with the MDPD's Economic Crimes Bureau's Arson Squad brought the ring down. A skeptical insurance adjuster had provided the squad with all it needed, a folder full of documents that the scammers had filed seeking yet another insurance payout for a fire set at a single-family rental home. Detective Ayme Sacramento leafed through the folder and paused when she saw two receipts.

Detective Sacramento, a 16-year veteran of the MDPD, has spent the last decade in the Economic Crimes Bureau, and has been specifically trained in arson investigation. Detective Sacramento said the key to any investigation is applying scrutiny to every detail, no matter how small. In this case, it was the receipts. "The handwriting for the receipt for the food and the receipt for the hotel were exactly the same," she said. "That's where we started developing from."

The "renter" in that particular case was a man named Luis Rosales. Detective Sacramento arrested him for uttering a forged instrument and grand theft because he provided documents to the insurance company, seeking the payout, and was issued a \$5,000 check by the company.

Mr. Rosales then gave investigators information on how the scheme worked. Mr. Rosales said he was offered \$10,000 just to be the name and the face on the lease. He



Left to right: Detectives Ayme Sacramento and Alfonso Najera helped crack an arson ring that reaped millions of dollars in insurance payouts. (Photo by Brian Ballou)

said that a public adjuster was also part of the scheme.

There were so many people involved in the fraud, Detective Sacramento and other members of the squad spent months on the investigation. As authorities began closing in on Mr. Avila, he fled to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Detective Alfonso Najera traveled there to arrest him. He confessed to 18 different arsons, including two in Chattanooga, according to investigators.

On at least two occasions, there were people inside dwellings adjacent to where the fires were set. "Thankfully, we didn't have a homicide here," said Detective Najera. "It only takes some smoke, it's just a miracle those people survived."

A total of eight arrests have been made, and federal authorities are still searching for more suspects. Complimenting their efforts in bringing those criminals to justice, the Arson Squad was awarded MDPD's Unit of the Quarter award for January through March 2018.

"It's very rewarding to put a stop to this particular ring, but there's no end to these types of crimes," Detective Najera said.



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Congratulations Police Power in Pink Team for raising more than \$52,000 for the American Cancer Society's 2018 Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Campaign. (Photo by Allison Bishop-Cooner)





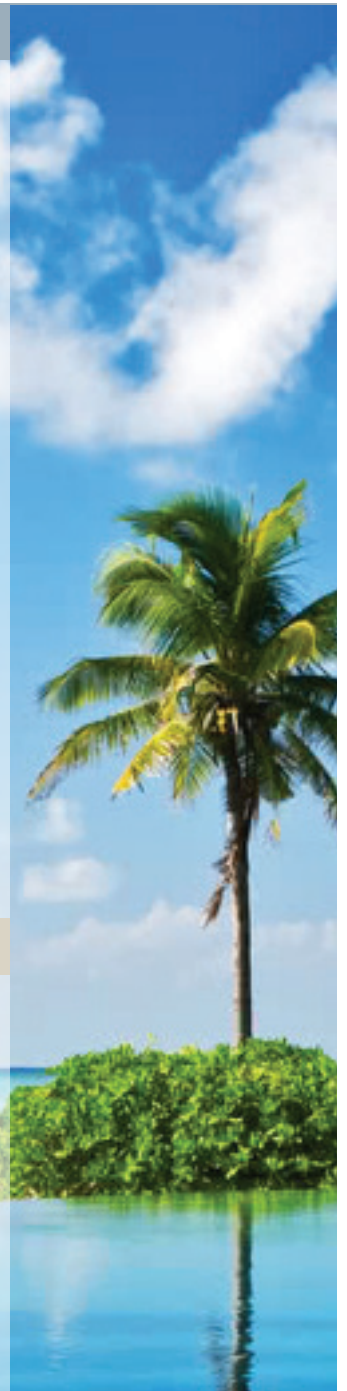
MDPD recently said farewell to 28 employees (19 sworn officers and 9 civilians) who retired after periods of service ranging from 8 to 37 years. Director Juan J. Perez, the Department's command staff, and the entire MDPD family wish our colleagues many, many years of happy retirement.

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# Thank You Blood Donors!



The Miami-Dade Police Department and OneBlood recently held successful blood collection drives at MDPD's Headquarters and Communications Bureau. Special thanks are extended to the donors listed below for helping save lives!

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Sergeant Michael Scott  
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Officer Jason Hammond  
Officer Michael Ritch  
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Data Entry Specialist 2 Cintia Balmaceda  
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