

Greetings from your Union:

These past few weeks have reminded many of the risk they face on the job. Just the other day three of Pasco's finest were shot at, forcing a deputy to take the life of a felon. From the limited information received, clearly a righteous shooting in all aspects. However can you be assured our agency and future fact finding entities or civil juries will see it the same way? Another situation where a deputy is trying to cross an intersection, believing a store clerk is being robbed. He was struck by a vehicle. In both instances, our deputies fared well in health. Situations like these are only two recent reminders of what we all as cops face. As the times get crazier, you can bet that the situations placing us in unavoidable situations will become more and more prevalent. Men/Women go years on the job, only to find their last few years are muddied by a complainant looking to take someone's job or retirement.

Both these members did not belong to the FOP Union, and regretfully could not have an FOP paid attorney at their side. This doesn't mean they shouldn't and won't receive support from their fellow brothers in law enforcement. I have yet to see a more assisting group than fellow cops. When help is needed, those of us who bleed the color of the badge, will always be there.

What these two issues bring to the forefront is the need for a solid legal defense plan. I don't think either of these members or those of the past ever felt they would become involved in a situation where they should have an attorney at their side. Not because they did anything wrong, rather to look after the members best interest from the standpoint of the agencies investigation and any pending civil issues which may arise from simply doing their job. This is not to say the agency will not do what is a thorough and proper investigation, however it has been known to happen.

Everyone should realize that the incident doesn't end after the administrative and/or criminal investigations; it ends after several years when a civil suit either is not filed and or is resolved. We've been cops long enough where it is hard to place our finances, pensions, homes in the hands of a civil jury. Having an attorney with you from the start may not erase all the pains of a major incident, but clearly making sure everything to your benefit is handled properly at the beginning will go a long way in resolving future issues.

Our FOP Attorneys are currently working with other members as we speak, one to get their job back and another to protect their rights to free speech and challenge the political attack the member is under. Whether you agree with some of the processes or not, every member has a right to be assured the investigation is fair and within the guidelines of the Officer's Bill of Rights. When the agency falls short of affording the member his/her basic due process, the FOP is going to challenge the investigative process and discipline in a proactive manner.

It is very important to make contact with a representative when you are facing allegations of misconduct. There are forms and boxes that if you check, will take away certain aspects outlined within the Bill of Rights.

The Union is continually working towards a contract with the Sheriff. Slow as it is, we are pushing forward. We all want to stand beside the one who signs our paycheck in front of the county commissioners and support his efforts to provide better and safer working conditions. The recent changes to patrol are clearly positive, so we have to believe the Sheriff has started listening to his members and the citizens who cried out for this help some time ago. This is the kind of positive actions which give us the belief we may be able to work with the sheriff on other issues which affect our safety and livelihood.

The Union has currently taken the stance to take a different approach during the beginning of this year. Our efforts to bring about change through politics did not pan out. Guess you can say us cops don't have the ability to play politics as other do in the political climate we are in. So we are taking the route of seeking assistance from PERC, whose independent Hearing Officers have rules in our favor so many times. The actual hearing for PERC has been scheduled for the later part of March. It is then, without further extensions, that we should know what further direction to take.

For the select few members who have left the union one can only wish them continued success in not becoming involved in a situation requiring legal assistance. Having insurance in today's climate is a necessary evil. We insure our vehicles, homes and life. It only makes sense to insure our job. For those considering the less expensive Sheriff's Association's legal defense, it will provide you a free will and maybe some relief from a traffic ticket, but to stand by you during an internal investigation or a criminal investigation and possibly a civil action, clearly they won't. Currently when we need assistance locally and it is approved by the State Lodge Attorney, we reach out to Attorneys Larry Hart and Kerry O'Connor.

The road has been much harder and longer than anyone has expected. Mistakes were made on both sides; however this is a year which can turn everything around. Tough financial times are still abounding, yet innovative ideas can be brought forth to provide those benefits you are so deserving of.

Union member or not, we are all law enforcement officers and must stand beside one another in safety and benefits.

Fraternally,

Robert Mitchell, Union President for Deputies/Corporals  
Gary Kling, Union President for Sergeants/Lieutenants