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Wilmington Veterans Affairs Medical Center police officer receives top national honor

WILMINGTON, Del. — Jeffery Steidler, Chief of Police for Wilmington Veterans Affairs Medical Center, received the Police Chief of the Year Award from the U.S. VA Office of Security and Law Enforcement.

Chief Steidler was recognized for his exemplary performance, leadership, and innovation as they align with the VA mission and values and was nominated by leadership at the Wilmington VA Medical Center.

Steidler is one of 5,000 VA police officers nationwide and one of 150 VA police chiefs eligible for the award. VA police officers are responsible for ensuring a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment for employees and patients alike. They maintain order through voluntary compliance and law enforcement as needed and are integrated into the patient care team through a variety of relationships and committee memberships.

Chief Steidler, a Chester County, Penn. native, has been the Chief of Police at the Wilmington VA Medical Center since 2018 and has been a police officer for 24 years, said the award is because of the officers he oversees.

“My award is really a reflection of the efforts, dedication and excellence of the 24 men and women of the Wilmington VA Medical Center Police. I am so fortunate to have a job I love that serves our nation’s heroes, while leading a terrific group of unsung heroes,” said Steidler.

Steidler’s leadership qualities as a police officer and a person have helped foster a cohesive unit for the department and is not lost on hospital leadership or his team.

“I was honored to nominate Jeff Steidler as VA Police Chief of the Year,” said Kim Butler, Associate Director for the Wilmington VA Medical Center. “We are extraordinarily proud of his accomplishment in receiving this great recognition.”

“Transparency, honesty and accountability are the first that come to mind,” said Paul Woodland, Deputy Chief of Police at Wilmington VA Medical Center. “These are traits that are the tripod for any law enforcement officer, so for someone to win such a prestigious award, you have to not only have those qualities yourself, but also have a supporting cast that also embodies them.”

Being a police officer at a medical center also presents unique challenges that require unique solutions and ideas.

“Chief Steidler leads a police force dedicated to community-style policing serving Veterans both within and outside of our actual facilities,” said Butler. “He empowers his officers to think



about care for the whole Veteran while still preserving the safety of our patients and staff. He has led our police service to a more proactive, preventative practice through strategies such as increased visibility and rounding.”

For Steidler, he understands the challenges and stresses the importance of flexibility in policing.

“Policing in a health care environment requires flexibility and critical thinking skills. Success is challenging because we strive to balance security, rule of law, and the rights and privacies of our Veterans and staff. Our officers must be incredibly flexible and possess a very large toolbox of skills to draw from,” stated Steidler on his strategy to meet and overcome these challenges.

“We [hospital leadership and police] believe strongly in a three-pronged approach to meeting these challenges. We will select and train the best police officers, looking for people with personal qualities that are consistent with our mission of service. We give them the tools and equipment that they need to meet these challenges daily. Lastly, we will support them and recognize officers and staff who go above and beyond to take care of our Veterans and staff with excellence.”

Woodland says that Steidler’s emphasis on building a quality team also extends to the Veteran community. Several programs have been initiated since Steidler arrived that makes Woodland proud to be an officer at the medical center.

“Since his arrival, Wilmington VA Police have been involved in several initiatives to include participation in the Special Olympic Law Enforcement Torch Run/Fundraiser, National Police Week 5k in memory of fallen VA police officers, Pizza with Police, Random Anti-crime Measures (RAM’s), First Light (Police assisted addiction recovery initiative), Mental Health First Aid, Suicide Prevention Program, Delaware Veterans Response Team (VRT) affiliate, Annual Point-in-Time Count and many others,” Woodland listed.

These Veteran-face programs are a source of pride for Steidler and helps shape his ideas of policework.

“The Wilmington VA Police enjoy a fully integrated relationship with our Veteran community. We are participants in many activities at the Wilmington VA and in the community. We have held Pizza with Police events to allow Veterans and our officers to relax in an informal setting and have good conversations. Most of our police officers have served our nation’s military, so they share many common experiences. It is all part of our mission to serve our Veteran communities,” he said.

These common experiences and interactions help his officers play a vital role in the prevention of a serious issue among Veterans, self-harm. This issue led to Steidler developing a Suicide Prevention Initiative at the medical center.

“Suicide is a national public health issue, and the Wilmington VA Medical Center makes our Veterans’ mental health and safety a top priority. Our officers have so much contact with our Veterans daily, most of which is in a capacity of offering help or assistance. We recognized that all these contacts could be used as opportunities to make sure that Veterans are taking advantage of all the services VA offers. Our officers are trained to recognize subtle signs that



an individual may be struggling with issues that they could receive help with right at that moment. We are so proud that we have referred dozens of Veterans over the past year to a medical care professional, with no appointment,” he said.

We enjoy a close working relationship with our clinical staff, and we can provide a quick introduction and warm hand-off on the spot, so the Veteran has someone to immediately talk to. The officers spend a lot of time at the entrances to the facility, talking to Veterans and providing information on services. We take this opportunity to be a welcoming presence as an honor and privilege.”

Because of this approach, Steidler’s team has been recognized for their efforts through various awards.

“Chief Steidler is now one of five on our team to have won a national annual VA police award,” said Woodland, 2015 Police Officer of the Year and 2018 Supervisory Police Officer of the Year. “Other winners were Lt. Stephen Thayer the 2016 Lead Officer of the Year, Sgt. Pedro Custodio the 2018 Lead Officer of the Year and Christopher Peters the 2018 Police Officer of the Year. The Wilmington VA Police were also selected as the Wilmington VA Medical Center Team of the Year for 2019.”

With examples like this, it is clear why Steidler was awarded this prestigious honor.

Woodland expanded on that sentiment, “I’ve been fortunate to work for, with, alongside, mentored, and be surrounded by, many great VA police chiefs, many of whom I wouldn’t be surprised to be an award winner. Chief Steidler, however, is easily one of the most well-rounded chiefs I’ve worked with. His law enforcement knowledge, factored with an unparalleled understanding of clinical, social work, mental health, human resources, literally every facet of Veterans Affairs, is second to none.”

With this personal recognition and his team’s performance, it highlights the impact he has had in his time as a police officer.

When asked what piece of advice Steidler received that he has always kept with him that has shaped his career, he offered, “Treat everyone as if they matter, because they do. I was fortunate to have learned from many outstanding police officers in my career. They treated everyone with respect, no matter what the situation was. I learned how powerful that can be, and how much conflict can be avoided with just being respectful and kind.”

Steidler was scheduled to receive his award from Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Office of Security and Law Enforcement, Frederick Jackson, at the annual VA Police Awards Banquet in May in Little Rock Arkansas. However, that event has been postponed as a result of COVID-19.

The Wilmington VA Medical Center provides health care to approximately 33,000 Veterans through its main hospital facility in Wilmington and five Community Based Outpatient Clinics in Delaware and southern New Jersey. To learn more, go to www.wilmington.va.gov.

May is also Mental Health Awareness Month and resources for Veterans can be found www.mentalhealth.va.gov. If you’re a Veteran in crisis or concerned about one, call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1.

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