

**Policing in Columbus, Georgia**  
**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q.** What hiring standards do we have for our police officers? How do we know they are fit for the job?

**A.** On average the Columbus Police Department (CPD) hires less than 20% of those that apply for a sworn officer position. We have educational and age minimums, certainly, but also require an extensive application process, employment and criminal background checks, a psychological and physical evaluation of each candidate, a full background check and an in person interview. Each applicant is required to provide access to their social media accounts for review. Any evidence of intolerance, instability, anger or judgment issues or fascination with weapons or violence is disqualifying. We are often criticized for having unfilled vacancies in the CPD. The truth is, we have more than enough applicants to fill all of our vacancies; however, we will not give just anyone a badge and a gun. Being a CPD police officer is only for the best, most qualified candidates.

**Q.** Do we train our officers? What type of training do they receive?

**A.** Each person hired to be a CPD officer must complete 400 hours of training at the Police Academy and pass the state mandated Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) testing. No new hire is allowed to be placed in service without a senior oversight partner for the first 18-months of his/her career. Thereafter, officers are required to take a minimum of 24 hours of training a year, but often take much more as their assigned tasks or circumstances warrant and are required to maintain certification with all weapons assigned to them. All CPD officers are required to take sensitivity or anti-bias training, which stresses cultural, gender, racial and sexual orientation issues. Additionally, all CPD officers take regular de-escalation and mental health awareness training.

**Q.** Does CPD have cameras to record traffic stops and police interactions with citizens?

**A.** Yes. All patrol cars are fitted with a dash camera to record both audio and video. All motor squad officers (motorcycle cops) and tactical units are assigned body cameras. CPD has 225 high quality body cameras.

**Q.** Are guns a first resort of police officers when interacting with citizens? How often do Columbus Police officer use guns or any use of force when interacting with the public?

**A.** Absolutely not, guns are a last resort in any police interaction, but sometimes that last resort occurs in seconds. All CPD officers are trained on a continuum of use of force, meaning they are taught to first use startling language (known as “verbal judo”), then closed hand fists, baton,

pepper spray, Taser and gun, in that order. The use of any of these tactics is known as “use of force”. The use of a gun is known as “use of deadly force”. In Columbus over the last five years, we have had some 861,417 calls for service and 57,143 arrests by Columbus Police Officers, yet we have had a total of 14 firings of a gun by officers (use of deadly force) and 4 fatalities from those firings. Our community’s average use of force rate is .0065%, some six times less than the national average use of force rate. Our Arrests and Use of Force numbers of the last five years are:

Year	Calls for Service	Persons Arrested	# of Use of Force Incidents	% of Arrests where Force was Used	# of Deadly Force Incidents
2015	171,386	8,984	72	.0080%	2
2014	170,112	10,467	79	.0075%	1
2013	175,660	12,302	77	.0062%	6
2012	175,367	12,711	74	.0058%	0
2011	168,892	12,679	69	.0054%	5

**Q.** When there is an officer involved shooting does CPD or the city investigate it themselves?

**A.** No. Since 2004, all officer involved shooting incidents are investigated by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). Because the GBI has a satellite office in Columbus, it is able to immediately take control of any police involved shooting scene and begin its investigation.

**Q.** How does CPD compare to other law enforcement agencies across the country in terms of police professionalism, protocols and best practices?

**A.** Our CPD is one of nearly 20,000 law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. These agencies have vastly different levels of systems and organizational structures affecting police professionalism, protocols and practices. Since 1993, CPD has subjected itself to the rigorous third-party review system conducted by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, Inc. (CALEA). CALEA’s purpose is to enhance public safety services by maintaining a standards of police best practices and administering an accreditation process to recognizing professional excellence. Of the nearly 20,000 law enforcement agencies in the country, only 168 are CALEA accredited. CPD has additionally been recognized as a CALEA Flagship Agency based on past achievements in overall professionalism in the public safety community. Columbus is recertified every three to five years through an intensive months-long CALEA review process. We are now working on what we hope will be CPD’s eighth CALEA certification.

**Q.** Do the Police “police themselves” in Columbus, Georgia? Are citizen complaints taken seriously or “swept under the rug”?

**A.** No, the police do not police themselves in Columbus, Georgia. Complaints are taken seriously and none is “swept under the rug”. There is a thorough process of check and balances. First, every complaint is investigated by the Office of Professional Standards and a full investigative file is established, which can include witness statements, video or audio tapes, digital patrol car data, etc. In 2015, we responded to 171,386 calls for service, made 8,984 arrests, received 66 officer complaints, and took disciplinary action against roughly 15% of the officers in those complaints. Citizens unhappy with the outcome of the complaint can seek review of a civilian, citizen elected official known under our Charter as the Public Safety Director (and Mayor), who is also charged with the hiring and firing of the Police Chief and has access to all investigative documents. Should a complainant continue to be dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaint, they may bring their concern to an elected body of citizen overseers with subpoena power, known as Council. Council has eight citizen district representatives to assure geographic diversity and two at-large citizen representatives. Of course, Council does not have to rely on any subpoena power, as they are the "owners," if you will, of all investigation documents and can call any and all CPD employees and documents before it. This review occurs in public at city council meetings. These checks on policing have been utilized from time to time. In addition, Columbus has a non-elected citizen Public Safety Advisory (PSA) Committee which has numerous legal duties and oversight responsibilities. Specifically, once an officer complaint investigation is complete, the PSA Commission can request a presentation by the Office of Professional Standards of the complaint and file. The full investigative file is also available to the public through the Georgia Open Records Act. Should the complainant remain unsatisfied with the outcome, they may pursue the matter in the court system and have the case adjudged by a jury of their peers.

**Q.** What is the Public Safety Advisory Board and what do they do?

**A.** The Public Safety Advisory Board is a citizen board of volunteers appointed by Council. The mission, objective, duties and powers of the Board are set out in a local ordinance, which reads:

**Sec. 2-231. - Introduction.**

A close relationship between public safety personnel and the community is an essential part of a responsive and responsible consolidated government;

The benefits of such a relationship are immeasurable for the public safety departments, citizens, the business community, visitors and government officials;

As a means of enhancing public safety-community relations, communications and community confidence, the mayor of Columbus, Georgia has proposed that a public safety advisory commission be created; and

The Columbus Council believes that the creation of a public safety advisory commission is a desirable step in ensuring valuable input from citizens and information exchange concerning the provision of public safety services in Columbus, Georgia.

**Sec. 2-232. - Establishment of commission.**

There is hereby established for Columbus, Georgia a citizens advisory commission to be known as the "Public Safety Advisory Commission."

**Sec. 2-233. - Mission.**

The mission of the public safety advisory commission is to recommend resources, public safety practices and policies, and citizens' responsibilities needed to achieve a safe community to the mayor, Columbus Council, and our public safety departments.

**Sec. 2-234. - Duties.**

- (a) The commission shall strive to create a climate of mutual respect and partnership between the community and public safety departments which helps achieve safety, order and justice for all citizens of Columbus.
- (b) The commission shall attempt to increase communication between public safety departments and the community, leading to a greater understanding of law enforcement operations in Columbus.
- (c) The commission shall identify public safety policy and resource issues related to law enforcement operations and methods of alternative policing.
- (d) The commission shall strive to decrease misunderstandings regarding the application of adopted public safety policies and procedures.
- (e) The commission shall provide recommendations and input related to public safety policies and procedures in an effort to reflect community values.
- (f) The commission shall assist the mayor and the Columbus Council in balancing community priorities and resources by advising it on public safety resource issues.
- (g) The commission shall strive to ensure that the policies and procedures of public safety departments protect the civil rights and liberties of everyone in Columbus.
- (h) The commission shall promote public safety operations which respect and reflect Columbus' rich culture and diversity.
- (i) The commission shall work to increase communications, understanding and trust between public safety personnel and citizens of Columbus.
- (j) The commission shall encourage problem solving and partnerships between citizens, neighborhoods and public safety departments.
- (k) The commission shall work to provide fair opportunities for citizens and criminal justice professionals to comment and participate with respect to the commission's operations and recommendations to Columbus Council.

(l) The commission shall make and present an annual report to the mayor and Columbus Council regarding its activities.

(m) Notwithstanding the duties outlined above, the commission shall have no power or authority to investigate, review, or otherwise participate in matters involving specific public safety personnel or specific public safety-related incidents.

(n) Notwithstanding any provision of this section, the commission may by majority vote refer any citizen complaint to the respective department head of any public safety department covered by this article for review or investigation.

**Sec. 2-235. - Composition.**

The commission shall be composed of 11 members, ten to be appointed by the Columbus Council and one to be appointed by the mayor. Each member of the commission shall be a resident of Columbus, Georgia. Five of the initial members shall serve an initial term of one year and shall then be eligible to serve for two additional consecutive three-year terms. Six of the initial members shall be eligible to serve for two consecutive three-year terms. Other than those members serving an initial one-year term, members shall not serve more than two consecutive three-year terms. Once appointed, the commission shall elect a chairperson to preside at its meetings which shall be held on a monthly basis. The chief of police shall provide the commission with clerical or administrative assistance. Notwithstanding any other provisions of this chapter, members of the commission shall serve at the pleasure of the Columbus Council.

**Sec. 2-236. - Ex officio members.**

The mayor, city manager, chief of police or his designee, Muscogee County Sheriff or his designee, Chief of Columbus Fire and EMS or his designee and municipal court marshal or his designee, shall be advisors to and ex officio members of the commission, but shall not be entitled to a vote at commission meetings. For purposes of this chapter, "public safety" shall include the Columbus Police Department, Columbus Department of Fire and EMS, the Muscogee County Sheriff's Department and the municipal court marshal's office.

**Q. What's the difference between the Columbus Police Department, the Sheriff's Office and the Municipal Court Marshal?**

**A.** CPD is a countywide police department and is the primary law enforcement agency of this county. CPD is the primary first responder for law enforcement and mans the streets of Columbus twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. CPD has all the law enforcement powers granted by state law within the jurisdiction of this county. The Muscogee County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) is the state's law enforcement agent within the county. Its primary functions are to run the county jail, serve legal process and papers and protect the courts. Sheriff's Deputies are required to be POST certified. MCSO Deputies can make traffic stops,

but typically do not. The Municipal Court Marshal has all the powers of the Sheriff, but only as those powers relate to Municipal Court. The Deputy Marshals typically are, but do not have to be POST certified. Deputy Marshals can make traffic stops, but typically do not.