

What To Do If You Are Stopped By The Police

Vehicle Stops

- ◆ As soon as you notice the police emergency lights, pull your vehicle over to a safe location immediately. Although you may not know the reason, you should pull over right away. You may have committed a traffic violation or there may be a problem with your vehicle of which you may not be aware.
- ◆ Remain in your vehicle while the officer approaches you. Exiting your vehicle does not help the officer and may be perceived as a threat. The officer will ask you to exit if needed. As a courtesy, turn on your interior light at night to assist the officer in seeing inside your vehicle.
- ◆ Keep your hands easily observable by placing them on the steering wheel. Do not reach for the glove box or under your seat. This action may cause the officer concern that you are reaching for a weapon. Keep in mind that the officer does not know you, or what your intentions might be.
- ◆ Give your operators license and vehicle registration to the officer if asked to do so. Virginia law requires that this information be provided to the police officer if you are stopped. Most officers will explain their reason for the stop after they receive your information.
- ◆ Do not become argumentative, disorderly, or abusive. If an officer has already written a summons, it cannot be voided at that time. If you believe you have been unfairly treated, do not start an argument on the side of the road. Your best alternative is to share your concerns with a police supervisor or to the court that will hear evidence in your case.

Pedestrian Encounters

Innocent individuals are often offended or angered because an officer has detained them for questioning. Although the delay might be inconvenient for you, the officers believes that there is a reason (the legal term is reasonable suspicion) to stop you and ask you some questions. Many of these stops are not actually initiated by the officer. Common reasons that can cause an officer to stop someone are:

- ◇ A citizen might have called 911 to complain about your presence or that you look suspicious.
- ◇ Someone might have pointed you out to the officer because they feel that you look or are acting suspicious.
- ◇ Your clothing or description might be similar to that worn by a suspect of a crime.
- ◇ You might be one of the only people walking in an area where a crime was recently committed.

Remember that police officers do not want to detain you any longer than necessary. If they received a complaint about you from another citizen, they have a duty to make contact with you and investigate. As soon as the police officer is able to determine that you have not done anything wrong or that you are not the person he/she is looking for, they will release you, thank you for your cooperation and return to duty.

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In all Encounters

Please Don't Be Offended. Most citizens already realize that law enforcement is a difficult and dangerous profession. Many police officers are killed each year and hundreds more are injured or assaulted. For this reason, police officers tend to be extremely cautious and place a great deal of emphasis on officer safety. Certain safety practices are instilled in our officers from their first day of training. Although these procedures maximize safety for the officer, they may seem impolite, offensive, or nonsocial to citizens who are not familiar with police practices.

Even though you might have no intentions of causing the officer harm, officers will probably maintain a protective posture until they feel that there is no risk of confrontation or injury. Remember, a police officer's job requires him or her to have regular encounters with dangerous people. As far as police officers are concerned, there are no "routine" pedestrian or traffic stops. Every citizen contact that the officer makes has potential for danger. All police officers know this fact: all citizens should be aware of it as well.

Avoid making sudden movements (for your wallet, for your coat, toward your waistband, etc.) until you inform the officer of your intentions and he/she has time to respond.

Do not touch the officer or violate the officer's personal body space. Keep 2-3 feet from the police officer.

Remain calm and avoid arguing. If you are uncooperative and refuse to answer reasonable questions, the encounter will probably last longer than necessary.

Comply first. Do what the officer asks you to do, then ask any question you might have. You will get an explanation from the officer or the officer's supervisor later.

There are times when members of the public have contact with a police officer and they come away with feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction. The VMI Police Department does not support or condone police misconduct of any type. In our experience, we have learned that those negative feelings are often a result of not knowing the reason(s) why an officer acted in a certain way. Unfortunately, the demands on a patrol officer do not always permit time for explanations at the time you are stopped. Hopefully, the information in this brochure will give you an understanding of police procedures and let you know what to expect if you are stopped by an officer.

If you would like to learn more about VMI Police Department or gain a better understanding of police perspectives and practices, consider contacting VMI Police Department to schedule a ride-along with one of our officers. If you would like to compliment or make a complaint against one of our officers, please contact us and ask to speak with the supervisor on duty.