

For some State Police, it's a posting in paradise

NANTUCKET – Amid sun-kissed cobblestone streets, cool island breezes, and multimillion-dollar homes sits a wood-shingled State Police barracks that features lush hydrangeas and a fenced-in backyard, and offers free housing for the commander and his family.

It is a sleepy outpost. Very sleepy. By ordinary police standards, there is very little for the four troopers here, much like their counterparts posted to nearby Martha's Vineyard, to do.

Maybe two incidents a day. Perhaps two arrests a month. A police blotter that, on average, sees fewer than two new entries each 24 hours.

The numbers are about the same 27 miles across the chop of Nantucket Sound, on the more populous Vineyard.

Get Metro Headlines in your inbox:

The 10 top local news stories from metro Boston and around New England delivered daily.

Thank you for signing up! [Sign up for more newsletters here](#)

A world away from gangs and grime, the troopers are more likely to escort dignitaries than tangle with drug dealers. They receive more calls for animals in the road than assaults. And public records show a majority of their runs are for security or property checks, giving troopers on the islands duties more aligned with those of a private security force.

The State Police posts – both of which supplement local police departments – were recommended for closure years ago in a state-commissioned report that envisioned a more efficient use of taxpayers' money. Yet the island stations have endured, even as criminal investigations, broad cost-cutting measures, and staff realignments continue to batter the State Police back on the mainland.

And somehow, despite the leisurely pace of police action, most of the six full-time troopers assigned to island duty earned more than \$35,000 each through overtime and additional pay last year, on top of salaries that exceed \$90,000.

"It sounds like there are a lot of resources that could be reallocated and we need to have

that conversation,” said Eileen McAnneny, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation.

David Procopio, spokesman for the department, said the agency serves everyone across the Commonwealth equally.

“Residents on, and visitors to, Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard deserve the same State Police services available to every other resident in Massachusetts,” Procopio said.

Along Nantucket’s bustling Main Street, shop owners and other residents greet a question about the role of State Police here with a blank stare. Residents are well acquainted with local police and the dozens of bicycle-riding community service officers hired each summer to help with parking and related issues. That’s when the island of 12,000 year-round residents explodes to more than 50,000.

But the role of State Police, for many, seems a mystery. And it was news to most that the station commander lives rent-free on an island where a fixer-upper can run in excess of \$700,000.

“I’ve only seen them on Milestone Road, doing radar” checking for speeding cars, said Melanie Kotalac, a 40-year resident who works at Mitchell’s Book Corner. Kelly Steffen, a 29-year-old bartender who has summered on the island for 20 years, said he is unfamiliar with troopers on the island. “Everything you see here is the municipal guys.”

If the number of calls for State Police assistance on the islands is infrequent, arrests are downright rare. Each island barracks logs about one arrest per month, typically for motorists driving without a license.

On Martha’s Vineyard, four troopers patrol approximately 90 miles of state roads and maintain one of two breath-test machines on the island, according to Procopio. One sergeant lives at the Oak Bluffs barracks. Three troopers live in their own housing, Procopio said.

Nantucket has four troopers: one sergeant who lives at the barracks and one permanent trooper who lives in his own housing. Two additional troopers are working the island this summer from July 1 through Labor Day.

State Police, Procopio said, determined “it is more cost-effective to maintain two buildings and pay for utilities than to rent barracks space” or transport troopers daily.

Procopio did not address whether state policing duties could be left to the local police departments on the two islands.



John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

A plainclothes state trooper entered his State Police SUV on South Water Street after leaving the Nantucket District Court.

The idea of abandoning State Police stations on the islands has been pitched before.

In 2011, while Massachusetts struggled out of the recession, the state spent \$752,000 to study cost savings for the State Police. The report recommended a massive realignment of resources by eliminating or consolidating nearly a third of their 36 barracks. The island posts were recommended to be phased out, "if alternate arrangements can be made with other law enforcement authorities for shared facilities" when State Police were needed on the island.

Procopio said the department has since deemed the island stations too important to close. He said he didn't have figures for their total cost.

If the stations were eliminated, the buildings would fetch millions on the real estate

market. The Nantucket station is a 2,300-square-foot house on a third of an acre, assessed at \$1.1 million. The Martha's Vineyard station in Oak Bluffs is larger and valued by the town at nearly \$1.4 million.

The assessments may understate the properties' values considerably. Real estate ads show properties in both neighborhoods fetching far more, as much as two and three times those assessed prices.

They are pieces of paradise the commanders enjoy, rent free. It is an extraordinary perk, but one with some fierce defenders. In 2001, then-state public safety secretary Jane Perlov incurred the wrath and felt the political might of the State Police union when she tried to impose a modest rent on the island station commanders. The matter was dropped.

Procopio cited high housing costs as a key reason for providing free housing to the islands' station commanders.

"Both barracks have histories of long-serving commanders who become respected and reliable members of the island communities," Procopio said.

Asked about the legality of the arrangement, Procopio cited a state regulation that allows agencies to enter into housing agreements with employees only if the occupancy is "in the best interest of, and necessary for, the operation of the agency and for the benefit of the Commonwealth."

Ordinarily, that means a fair market rent, minus the cost of upkeep. The island barracks are treated as a special case.

Local police don't chafe at the state presence. Nantucket's police chief, William Pittman, said the troopers help ease the burden on his department, particularly to help with security for visiting dignitaries such as Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, and the president's Cabinet.



Erin Clark for the Boston Globe

The State Police barracks on Martha's Vineyard.

Pittman said he is short more than a dozen officers in his 40-member staff and is waiting for six cadets to complete training at the State Police academy. He asked for the two additional state troopers for the summer, his first such request in more than a decade.

Pittman also said he struggles to keep his department fully staffed because high housing costs on the island, coupled with the department's relatively low pay – starting salary is about \$57,000 – mean he is often losing officers to communities on the mainland.

Nantucket's local leaders, among them Select Board chair Jason Bridges and board member Rita Higgins, said they would hate to lose the state troopers, who they've come to think of more as neighbors. But they could not point to specific services the department provides that are appreciably different from the local force, other than stopping speeding motorists on the island's small stretch of state highway known as Milestone Road. The town is poised to move its massive fuel tanks from downtown to mid-island next year, forcing commercial fuel trucks to regularly travel that highway.

"There will be more of a need to make sure those trucks are compliant," Bridges said. He hopes that will ward off any talk of closing the barracks.

But that possibility seemed far off on a recent cloudless weekday afternoon. Visitors to the barracks found the office locked at midday. A call to the barracks number was met with recorded instructions to hang up and dial 911 – to reach local police – in the event of an emergency.

/Kay Lazar can be reached at kay.lazar@globe.com Follow her on Twitter [@GlobeKayLazar](https://twitter.com/GlobeKayLazar).
Todd Wallack can be reached at twallack@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@twallack](https://twitter.com/twallack)./

For some State Police, it's a posting in paradise