

The Star-Ledger

More than 140 troopers join N.J. State Police as force celebrates its 100th anniversary

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger
Published March 18, 2020

When James Dawson's son was born two weeks ago, Dawson was a State Police recruit.

On Wednesday, Dawson's first act after taking the oath of office was to hold his newborn for the first time since the birth.

"It was tough, but I had support from my classmates and all the staff at the academy," Dawson said. "I've always wanted to be a state trooper."

More than 100 new officers joined New Jersey's largest police force Wednesday night after months of training away from their families.

State leaders welcomed the graduates at the Prudential Center in Newark a century after the State Police began. One hundred and thirty-eight men and six women became officers amid an unprecedented time for law enforcement.

"You are entering the ranks of our troopers at a crucial time in our state's history," Gov. Phil Murphy said at the beginning of the more than two-hour ceremony. "You are stepping onto the field just as our battle against COVID-19 is at its peak."

State Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said the troopers were a "ray of hope" for residents who struggled to trust officers.

"You are now the most visible symbols of law enforcement in this state," Grewal said. "That's an awesome, awesome opportunity."

Col. Patrick Callahan, acting Superintendent of the State Police, appeared to choke up as he talked about the pride he felt as a trooper, and he reminded officers to show compassion even to people they're arresting.

The new troopers were led onto the arena floor by bagpipers and sat in socially distanced chairs. Family members were scattered across the seats, while more than two thousand people watched online.

Recruits first met Nov. 2 at the Sea Girt academy, when the pandemic was well underway.

The class was also marked by tragedy. Lucas C. Homeijer, 27, died in December after boxing with another recruit.

The class voted unanimously to posthumously award Homeijer a badge, officials said, and Callahan presented it to Homeijer's father.

"Thank you 161, and thank you Luke," retired Sgt. Don Homeijer said after receiving the badge.

After the ceremony ended, troopers erupted in cheers and embraced each other on the floor.

Of the 144 new officers, 139 have college degrees, 62 are military veterans and 29 previously worked in law enforcement, according to a press release.

Several were honored individually.

Kyle Fauvell received the Father Grady Award for having the highest grades. William Pope won the Captain Baxter Award for marksmanship. The H. Norman Schwarzkopf Award went to Chad Haegele for having the highest physical fitness scores. James Heitzer earned the Lieutenant James Walsh Award for his "dedication, commitment, loyalty, and unselfishness during training," an official said.

Instructors selected Robert Shalikar for the Commandant's Award, while recruits honored Craig Morton with the Superintendent's Award.

The troopers will report for duty Monday.