



# ASHE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

SHERIFF B. PHIL HOWELL

CHIEF DEPUTY DANNY HOUCK



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For Immediate Release  
September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## New Safety Measures During Football Games

On Friday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, Huskies fans heading into the varsity football game at Ashe County High School may have noticed some new safety equipment in place. We say “may notice” because the devices are pretty unobtrusive and are easy to miss. Because of this, we wanted to take this opportunity to make the community aware of these devices and share some of their intended uses.

At each stadium gate entrance, Ashe County deputies will be manning the latest technology in what is known as “opengate” weapons screening devices that Ashe County Schools recently purchased. If right now you’re picturing the narrow, intimidating metal detectors of the past, think again. This exciting new technology is inviting, low-key, and, frankly, pretty forgettable. That’s why we at the Sheriff’s Office and our partners at Ashe County Schools are excited about this new school safety initiative.



It is important to note that these devices are not in place because of any perceived threat or issue but instead are being rolled out as a proactive approach to keeping Ashe County students safe, which is always our priority. Implementing these metal screening devices has been a small but essential part of a much larger school safety initiative partnership with Ashe County Public Schools, detailed weeks ago in a press release by Superintendent Cox.

So, ‘why now’ might you ask? Easy. For years, small, idyllic communities like ours have struggled with whether to put screening devices in schools. The discussion always had valid opinions on both sides of the debate, with one side pointing out that the devices would provide an extra layer of safety and the other correctly pointing out that old metal detector technology could intimidate and inconvenience students. This new opengate technology virtually eliminates that debate. In short, we’re at a point where these high-tech devices are so unassuming and work so seamlessly and quickly that the benefits far outweigh the old, frankly then-valid, concerns of the old technology.





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*"Throughout the nation, small, picturesque communities with low crime rates like ours have, sadly, not been immune from tragedy, so for us to rely on 'hope' alone to safeguard our children is not enough.", said Sheriff B. Phil Howell. "I'm excited about any tools that allow my deputies to keep Ashe County kids safe. These new weapons screening devices are a huge leap toward protecting our community."*

As mentioned above, the new devices will be up and running for the next Huskies' football game on September 22<sup>nd</sup>. School Resource Deputy Dusty Farmer and Sgt. Brian Blanco has taken the lead in learning the new system, and they will be on hand at each stadium gate to show off the devices and answer any questions that community members may have about them.

With the new weapons screening devices in place, we remind everyone to quickly check themselves and their bags for weapons or prohibited items before walking toward the stadium. We understand that it's easy to forget something like a small pocket knife that is carried every day for work, so we ask that you perform this self-check before heading to the gate to hopefully avoid a long walk back to the car as we know nobody wants to miss a Huskies kickoff.

It is important to note that leadership at Ashe County Schools, along with command staff with the Ashe County Sheriff's Office, have been engaged in long and thoughtful discussions about the idea of expanding these open gate metal screening devices, at some level, on occasion to all our public schools, not just at sporting events. Both agencies have arrived at the shared opinion that student safety is paramount and that we are responsible for using the tools available to us when and where appropriate.



*"I've got two young kids in Ashe County Public Schools myself, and I'll be honest, I doubt my wife, or I would have never wanted them going through those old clunky,*

*Closter-phobic metal detectors.", said SRO Sgt. Brian Blanco. "I've been testing these new machines, and they're so fast and subtle I doubt my kids would even notice them. That's a good thing. It's my responsibility to worry about safety; it's the kids' responsibility to learn, have fun, and be kids. These devices make that happen."*

Thank you, Ashe County, for entrusting us with this community's most precious asset, our children. Thank you to Ashe County Schools for providing our deputies with the tools to honor our responsibility to everyone who calls Ashe County home.

We will see you at the game. Go Huskies!!

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