

# Gift cards for driving offenses? Riding along with the Summons of Joy

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**Watch the video below:**

**ALTON** - On a brisk morning in late November, **Alton Police Lt. Seth Stinnett** got into his patrol vehicle and drove around Alton looking for drivers committing the most minor of offenses.

Missing front license plates, broken taillights, dysfunctional blinkers and even air fresheners dangling from the rear view mirror served as reasons for Stinnett to turn on his lights and approach the drivers. Instead of getting a ticket, drivers were given a friendly verbal warning and a gift card with \$50 toward various businesses.

Stinnett, a 16-year veteran of the **Alton Police Department**, is the coordinator for the second annual "**Summons of Joy**" program. During the months of November and December, officers are able to pay \$20 for one month, or \$40 for both, and are allowed to grow beards or dress casually. That money is collected from officers, dispatchers, jailers and everyone working in the department and used to buy gift cards. Those cards are given to errant drivers in the spirit of community policing and holiday cheer.

"We can do it for anything not considered an arrestable offense," Stinnett said. "We do it mostly for equipment violations, such as busted taillights or turn signals. If someone has a warrant out on them, we can't look the other way for that."

No warrants were executed Wednesday morning when Stinnett invited Riverbender.com for a ride-along. In fact, Stinnett was able to give three motorists gift cards for **Target**, **Shop-N-Save** and **Save-A-Lot**, three businesses Stinnett said went the extra mile for the department and community.

"When we came in to purchase gift cards, and told them what we were doing, they actually threw a free \$50 card in with them," he said.

Officers raised more than \$1,300 through their beards and casual dress. That money was invested in 26 gift cards, which will all be given to members of the community by Christmas, Stinnett said. Besides the three businesses listed above, the department also purchased \$50 gift cards from **Dollar General**, **Schnuck's**, **Casey's**, **K-Mart**, **Steak and Shake**, **IHOP** and **Applebees**.

"We're encouraging people to use it to enjoy their holidays and purchase gas and food," Stinnet said.

The idea to implement the Summons of Joy program came from **Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons** who saw it put in action in **Ferguson**. Simmons said he has been attending community policing meetings for two years and lifted the idea from those to do it.

"It's a great program to build more community relations and appreciation for our police department," he said.

Stinnett stopped four motorists Wednesday morning, three of whom were given gift cards in place of citations. The fourth did not receive a gift card because Stinnett believed she acted in a disrespectful manner when speaking to him.

"Some people talk themselves right out of getting a gift card," he said. "All you really have to do is be nice."



The other three motorists were very grateful for their gift from the department. Alton resident **Amber Monroe**, who was stopped for missing a front license plate, said she was confused when she saw the flashing lights behind her.

"I'm never in trouble," she said. "I try to stay to stay out of trouble, so I didn't know what I did wrong."

Stinnett gave Monroe \$50 toward groceries after asking her to step out of the car. She thanked him, saying she was on her way to get groceries anyway.

"A lot of people talk about how the Alton Police suck," she said. "Next time I hear someone say that, I'm going to speak up and tell them the Alton Police gave me \$50 to get food for my kids."

That reaction is what the department hopes to receive from the Summons of Joy program. Stinnett said he tries to target drivers who look like they could use the gift card this holiday season. He tends to stay away from stopping drivers in expensive or luxurious vehicles, focusing instead on the typical daily drivers the majority of Altonians use to get from place to place.

**Allison Henderson** was the second recipient of a gift card Wednesday morning. She was given \$50 toward Save-A-Lot, and hugged Stinnett upon receiving the good news. Henderson had things dangling from her rear view mirror and her license had recently expired - an offense Stinnett said he would look past.

"This was awesome," she said. "It was really cool. My birthday was Monday, so it was really great to get this today."

Stinnett told the recipients of the cards to spend the money on things like food and gas and asked they not use it to buy unnecessary items such as alcohol and tobacco.

A third motorist, **Roselyn Tammons**, was stopped in her driveway for having an air freshener on her rear view mirror.

"I was really nervous when he told me why I was pulled over," she said. "I thought, gosh, I have to get these down."

Tammons said she felt "overwhelmed, blessed and shocked" when Stinnett gave her a \$50 gift card toward Shop-N-Save. She told him she had five children and would use that money to help the household during the holiday season. She also gave Stinnett a hug.

"She was amazing," he said. "People are really grateful for this, and I love doing it for them."

The Summons of Joy program will continue until Christmas, Stinnett said.