

## *Volunteer Programs: Maintaining Services in a Tough Financial Climate*

A focus group conducted by the Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program on Volunteer Programs: Maintaining Services in a Tough Financial Climate in September of last year, examined the use of law enforcement volunteers in the current economy and what impact, if any, it has had on police departments. The focus group was also a time for individuals to share their thoughts and ideas about financial and budgetary concerns facing law enforcement volunteer programs and how to respond.

Topics of discussion included officer roles versus volunteer roles, use of volunteers in lean financial times, concerns stemming from the current financial climate, and how the VIPS program can assist. Many departments have been responding by placing/training volunteers in duties not previously tackled by volunteers. Of course volunteers can never replace paid staff members, but can supplement in certain areas. While volunteer programs have aided their departments tremendously, it was pointed out that overtaxing volunteers can also be difficult on departments. Advertising for skilled-based volunteers such as grant writers was encouraged, and it was unanimously agreed that no matter the size of the department, volunteer recognition and acceptance is vital to a successful program.

While departments may be cutting staff and programs, the use of volunteers remained consistent. The services provided by VIPS volunteers cannot be replaced. In these vulnerable economic times, agencies are looking for more creative ways to stretch the dollar; one such resource is volunteer programs. The following three featured programs represent a small sample of programs that are doing more with less.

### *Hazelwood, Missouri, Police Department*

With 76 sworn officers, and 17 civilian staff members, the Hazelwood, MO, Police Department (HPD) serves a population of 25,000 spanning 15 square miles. Hazelwood, MO, is one of 109 municipalities of St. Louis, and the fourth largest. The department was also a VIPS award winning volunteer program in 2007. Currently the department has 25 active volunteers placed in various areas of the department, boards and committees, assisting the department on all levels. Police Chief Carl Wolf of the Hazelwood Police Department serves on the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Board as the current Vice President/Treasurer.

HPD first began using volunteers about 15 years

ago and presently would not be able to function as well without them. Volunteers have been able to increase their services to the community over the years and relieve some of the burden of the officers. Volunteers come from various professional backgrounds and many are retired.

The volunteer program offers a recruitment video on the department volunteer Web site, as well as posts on digital traffic signs around the area to recruit volunteers. The department has also found word-of-mouth and newspaper advertising to be lucrative forms of volunteer recruitment. HPD also utilizes Nixle to recruit volunteers. Nixle provides a free service for agencies to cross link information and keep residents up to date of emergencies and activities via text and e-mail.

Department volunteers actively assist in Sobriety Check Points, Radar Speed Check, Court Services, Records Support, Bicycle Patrol, Mobile Command Post, Digital Display Trailer, Volunteering Mentoring Program, Citizen Observation Patrol, Vacation Checks, Data Entry, Vehicle Service, DARE Support, Holiday Bank Detail and much more. Volunteers are also placed in the local mall substation and assist with answering the phone, patrolling the mall, assisting officers, and providing a police presence to deter retail theft. All volunteers are required to complete the Citizens Police Academy class prior to joining the program. The local Volkswagen dealership has committed to donating a car for volunteers that is switched out every 6,000 miles for a new vehicle. It is with this vehicle that volunteers are able to provide community patrol services.

Volunteers are given ID cards that give them full access to the department, including the fitness center. All volunteers are required to work a minimum of four hours per week; however, many exceed that number. Volunteers are given patches to mark their hours of service to the department. Those who cross the 500 hour mark, receive the coveted maroon blazer as a form of appreciation for their commitment to the department. One volunteer for the department has donated more than 8,000 hours of service since the start of the program. Other forms of recognition include the volunteer of the year award, bi-monthly group activities, and participation in department barbeques and annual holiday party. HPD volunteers have also formed the CARE committee, where they have taken charge of sending flowers and greeting cards to volunteers and staff members that are ill. One dollar a month is donated by the volunteers themselves for birthday greetings and such for fellow volunteers. Volunteers meet regularly to discuss scheduling and upcoming events.

The volunteers have proven to be an invaluable resource to HPD and some have even ended up as paid employees of the department. Presently, the department does not have the budget to hire more staff and thus volunteers have been asked to do more. This allows for the officers to maintain workload without compromising their services to the community. In 2008, Hazelwood Police Department was recognized as a United Way Volunteer Center for their service in the greater St. Louis area. The department would not be able to function on the same level if not for the volunteer program.

*Woodway, Texas, Public Safety Department*

Located approximately two hours north of Austin, Texas, Woodway is a vibrant town spanning eight mountainous miles and has a population of 9,000. Woodway is a master-planned community with approximately 1,850 of its 3,548 acres allocated to residential use and the remainder allocated to commercial development and agricultural use. Also known as “The City of Choice,” Woodway is located in McLennan County just outside of Waco, Texas. Major industries in the area include, Mars, Inc., Curves, and Lehigh Cement, Inc. The Woodway Public Safety Department (WPSD) employs 27 paid officers, 18 civilians, five unpaid auxiliary officers, and five volunteers. The most extensive crime in Woodway is residential and vehicle burglary.

The Woodway volunteer program has been in existence for more than 30 years and volunteers dedicated more than 900 hours to the department last year. The volunteer program, including liability, is covered under the overall department budget. WPSD promotes the same approach with volunteers as it does with paid staff. The department seeks quality service by demonstrating equality between employees and volunteers. Moreover, volunteers are given the same treatment and credentials as staff and are often paired with sworn officers while out on patrol. Volunteers are given uniforms, ID cards, and relevant equipment while on duty. To keep records up-to-date, periodic background checks of volunteers are required. While Citizens Police Academy training is provided, it is not a requirement to become a volunteer. All volunteers, including volunteer supervisors are given a volunteer manual and just as paid staff,

volunteers are required to complete the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education. However, one aspect of the volunteer program that could benefit from growth would be additional training for volunteers.

Volunteers assist not only at the department but offer their assistance to local businesses throughout Woodway and the City of Waco. The volunteers assist the department during special community events such as the annual 4th of July and Christmas Day parades, family movie night, and National Night Out festivities. Volunteers give tours of the department to visiting scout groups and schools, and also visit schools to give talks on safety, crime prevention, and emergency preparedness. In addition, the department has three SWAT volunteers with former military experience. The SWAT volunteers are trained counter snipers and assist with SWAT training at the department.

Volunteer appreciation is critical to the department and volunteers are always recognized at the city’s annual banquet as well as WSPD’s annual city-wide barbeque. Volunteers are also awarded plaques for exceptional service. Chief Yost Zachery, who serves on the IACP’s board as the current 4th Vice President believes that good management is key to a successful volunteer program. Only if managed correctly can volunteers fully tap into their potential. The positive effect of the WPSD volunteer program has impressed even their mayor and city council members, who are regularly updated of volunteer efforts at city budget meetings and also continue to support the program. WPSD was awarded a plaque last year from the Texas Police Chiefs Association Recognition program for outstanding service.

*Gulf Breeze, Florida, Police Department*

Gulf Breeze, Florida, is a waterfront town of approximately 6,000 residents located in the panhandle of Florida. The Gulf Breeze Police Department (GBPD) consists of 17 full time and six part time sworn officers, and three sworn auxiliary officers. In addition to the sworn, there are eight full time and five part time employees. The department is assisted by 23 volunteers and hopes to increase that number to 48 by the completion of the current training period. The volunteer program was established in 2005, receiving full support from Chief Peter Paulding. Volunteers have logged approximately 1,300 hours per year over the past two years. The hours contributed by the volunteers add to the overall value of the department in such unfavorable economic times.

The volunteer application process is similar to that of the department's employment application, including a background and driving history check. In addition, a medical check is also completed to ensure volunteers are in good medical condition to complete certain volunteer duties. Although the VIPs program is overseen by a Sergeant and patrol officer, minimal supervision is required as volunteer themselves have assumed many supervisory responsibilities of other volunteers. Nonetheless, volunteer performance is monitored on a daily basis. Although officers were ambivalent at first toward the volunteers, they now recognize that they are an essential part of the department.

Training, including CPR/AED, is provided to all incoming volunteers with additional ongoing training by senior volunteers. Subsequent training is provided as certifications expire. Volunteers meet on a regular basis and are also invited to department and city-wide meetings. As recognition is an important component of any volunteer program, GBPD invites volunteers to all recognition events as well as an appreciation dinner held solely for volunteers.

The bulk of volunteer activities include traffic assistance and motorist control as Gulf Breeze is home to major Highway 98, where averages of 50,000 cars drive through each day, and 150,000 during special events. During one of those traffic patrols, a volunteer saved a life by calling for medical help after detecting a motorist slumped over from diabetic shock.

GBPD also has a Senior vs. Crime program, where volunteers assist senior citizens with civil complaints such as unfulfilled contracts, tenant/landlord issues, poor workmanship, and the like. The program was developed by the Florida Attorney General and has allowed the GBPD to extend their services beyond the authority of the officers. Volunteers also assist with fleet maintenance, disaster response, and holiday patrol.

At one point, the possibility of cutting the volunteer program was discussed to offset department costs. However, after conducting a fleet analysis, the department determined the significant need of the volunteers. Not only has the department saved on overtime, but having lost more than one full time position due to



budget cuts, the value added by the volunteers is even greater.

Additionally, given the small size of the department, the use of volunteers has proven beneficial in providing continued quality service to the Gulf Breeze community.

For Additional Information

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The Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program works to enhance the capacity of state and local law enforcement to utilize volunteers. VIPS serves as a gateway to resources and information for and about law enforcement volunteer programs. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) manages the VIPS Program in partnership with and on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.



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