

An Emerging Sector in Law Enforcement Volunteering: Volunteers in Investigations

Following a focus group conducted by the Volunteers in Police Service Program on the subject of using volunteers for investigative purposes, we decided to feature four such agencies in our latest VIPS in Focus. These well trained and skilled volunteers work in investigations and on cold case squads, while enhancing their department's productivity in handling crimes against persons and property, and identity crimes.

Pasadena, California, Police Department

Pasadena, CA, has a population of 146,000 and is home to one of the country's most famous tourist spots, the Rose Bowl. The Pasadena Police Department (PPD) employs a staff of 400 employees and 260 sworn officers. Currently the department has more than 160 active volunteers placed on 12 specialized teams, boards, and committees, assisting the department on all levels. Pasadena was the host city for the California Association of Chiefs of Police State Conference earlier this year as Chief Bernard Melekian serves as the current President of the association. The conference attracted more than 365 attendees.

The volunteer services program at the PPD has been in existence for more than 20 years.

Volunteers are recruited, screened, and interviewed by the volunteer coordinator. The PPD's Citizens Police Academy serves as the basic recruiting tool for volunteer services. All volunteers, with a few exceptions, must complete the academy prior to applying for any volunteer position. The 12-week course exposes citizens to the different divisions and operations of the Pasadena Police Department. Volunteers are also subject to a background investigation and interview before being cleared for duty. Volunteers are selected for a specific division on the basis of program and department needs. Orientation to the department is reinforced at the time of placement in the position. Hands-on training is given by a police staff member when a volunteer assumes a new assignment.

Department volunteers actively assist with various volunteer programs including the Citizens Assisting Pasadena Police Program, Youth Accountability Board, Parade Watch, Safe Shopping Detail, Volunteer Translation Team, Chaplains Group, and Equestrian Unit. Volunteers assist with traffic control and parking at local events, participate in National Night Out, the Kids and Teen police academies, and the Citizens Police Academy.

In 2006, the Pasadena Police Department received an award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police for their Identity Theft program, the first of its kind. The innovative “Community Response to Eradicate and Deter Identity Theft” (C.R.E.D.I.T.) program is made up of five volunteers who assist the Financial Crime Unit of the department. Each volunteer brings a distinctive asset to the program to assist in solving ID crimes. One volunteer retired as a Vice President with the Bank of America, where she worked for 39 years. Volunteers spend between two to ten hours a week sifting through cases and pursuing potential leads by making phone calls, contacting businesses and victims, and typing case reports. The volunteers are not only able to keep the victims up to date on their case status, but also offer a personal connection and attention that officers may not have the time to provide.

The volunteers have proven to be an invaluable resource to the department and as a result, the Pasadena Police Department has forged strong partnerships with the community. At this time, the department is looking into a Pawn Shop Detail Program where the bulk of the work performed would also be completed by volunteers. The program will be modeled after the C.R.E.D.I.T program. It is California law that pawnshops provide a copy of all pawn slips to the local police department. The volunteer will assist in entering pawn tickets into a searchable database, making it easier for detectives to conduct stolen property searches.

Charlotte Mecklenburg, North Carolina, Police Department

Known as the “Queen City,” Charlotte, North

Carolina, is America’s fifth largest urban area. While rooted in the southeast of the country, Charlotte offers a metropolitan lifestyle with southern charm. The Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) serves a population of 809,500 residents. More than 1,600 sworn officers and 465 civilian employees provide public safety services to the communities of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The department has more than 550 volunteers, including one who has been on board for a record-breaking 26 years.

Volunteers at the CMPD provide critical services in to the department and community. In addition to a Citizens on Patrol Unit, Animal Control Unit, Parking Enforcement, and Police Athletic League program, CMPD volunteers also assist with the Investigations Bureau, and have a Crime Scene Investigations Unit (CSI). All volunteers are required to go through fingerprinting and a criminal background check, including a driver’s license history check and drug screening. Volunteers that take on special roles such as investigations are often required to submit to additional screening such as a polygraph test given that some positions involve sensitive and classified information. Those steps are taken to ensure the volunteers working on the cases adhere to the same standards set for officers of the department.

Volunteers are required to complete a training and orientation session helping them become familiar with the policies of the department and their assigned position prior to placement. Volunteers must dedicate a minimum of 16 hours of service per month with a minimum of six months service. The first 90 days are

probationary for the department and the volunteer. Some units have specific requirements and training. Volunteers assigned in investigative units offer a unique perspective to solving crimes. At this time, the CMPD Cold Case Squad consists of two detectives and one FBI agent. The review teams consist of six civilian employees with former law enforcement experience that determine if the case needs investigations. If so, volunteers are sometimes incorporated into the team. There are two exceptional volunteers that assist in several capacities. Some of those duties include conducting research, locating people, patting witnesses, and/or writing lab requests, and any other duties determined necessary by the individual division offices. To date, the volunteer unit has worked on 101 of 350 cold cases. Of those cases, 26 have been solved.

Volunteers assigned to the CSI unit at CMPD assist in processing of evidence by fingerprinting and taking photographs. Volunteers may be assigned to the following units: auto theft, missing persons, gangs, vice/narcotics, sex crimes, criminal intelligence, language skills, or homicide. These volunteers receive special technique training pertaining to the identification, handling, and preservation of key evidence. In addition to specialized training, they also ride with a certified crime scene investigator prior to their first investigation.

In addition to their individual duties, volunteers assisting in the evaluation of a case will write critique reports. The support and aid of the volunteers in these investigative efforts

has been immeasurable to not only the families and victims but the police department and community as a whole.

El Paso County, Colorado, Sheriff's Department

El Paso County encompasses more than 2,200 square miles of land in east central Colorado. The topography of the county varies from mountainous regions on the west to flat prairie land on the east. All sides feature uninterrupted panoramic views of the country which inspired Katherine Lee Bates to write the poem "America the Beautiful" after her visit there. The El Paso County Sheriff's Office (EPSO) employs 538 full time staff, 349 sworn and 189 civilian, organized under three bureaus: the Detentions Bureau, the Law Enforcement Bureau, and the Support Services Bureau.

EPSO's 500 VIPS volunteers fall under the purview of the Support Services Bureau with supervision from a full-time civilian coordinator. EPSO has several components to its volunteer program including: The Citizen's Advisory Council; Reserve Section; Cadet Program; Victim Advocacy; Search and Rescue; Wildland Fire; Citizen Patrol; RACES (Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service); Inmate Programs (Chaplains, Music Therapy, Shakespeare classes, Reintegration/Recovery); Patrol Chaplains; Language Services; Fire Investigations; HazMat; Range Assistants; Emergency Services; Administrative/Clerical; CERT; and Investigations.

The volunteer program at EPSO began in 1996 and the volunteer investigative unit followed in 2001. In 2000, three retirees from various

professions formed the Cold Case Squad who examine major crimes, general investigations, sex crimes/offenders, while paired with sworn officers. It was through this squad that the current volunteer investigative unit was conceived.

Currently, the unit has eight active volunteers who contributed a total of 725 hours in 2008 and have logged 826 hours through July of this year. At this time, Colorado Springs has all volunteer cold case staffers. Detectives screen the volunteers who must also pass a criminal background and reference check, a voice stress analysis, and polygraph test.

The investigations unit assists with property and financial crimes, missing persons, runaways, and cold cases. Volunteers in this unit maintain the cold case library, including the organization of the case books and workbooks; answer tip lines; organize case information; create spreadsheets and reports; search computer and other records for background information on persons or property; reconstruct crime scenes; and attend meetings and briefings concerning investigations. In 2006, the unit solved a 19-year-old murder case. The volunteers are currently working on 16 homicide and two missing persons cases.

Denver, Colorado, Police Department

The most populous city in the state of Colorado, Denver is known as the Mile High City as it sits one mile above sea level on the base of the Rocky Mountains. The city is also home to the this year's Annual IACP Conference and Exposition, attracting more than 13,000 law enforcement executives to the city. The Denver

Police Department is staffed with 1,569 sworn employees, accompanied by 250 volunteers. In 2006, Denver Police Department (DPD) began using a volunteer in the Cold Case Homicide division and the following year, created the Volunteer Crime Scene Team (VCST), the first of its kind. There are now 15 cold case volunteers in Denver's Volunteer Crime Scene Team and one volunteer in Cold Case Homicide. The VCST has contributed more than 7,456 hours, and the homicide volunteer more than 407.

The Volunteer Crime Scene Team program was developed in 2006 to augment crime laboratory field resources in response to an overwhelming number of property crimes, including car theft. This approach was in addition to Denver's nation-leading use of DNA to reduce the rate of property crimes. The all volunteer team took part in an intensive one year training program at the Denver Police Department Academy. The goal of the program was to select 21 volunteer civilians who could demonstrate the volunteer service and spirit by fulfilling the Volunteer in Policing mission to deliver quality support services to the sworn and civilian employees of the Denver Police Department and to the citizens of Denver. This task was completed by training highly qualified and dedicated civilians to collect fingerprints, biological evidence, and to take photographs while gathering other critical forensic evidence on scene to assist the crime laboratory in processing and handling theft from motor vehicle, criminal mischief crimes, and other assignments.

Driving a specially marked Volunteer Crime Scene van with a city seal when responding to calls, the volunteers are equipped with kits to

process evidence photography equipment and kits to process equipment. The VCST unit has responded to calls of theft from motor vehicle cases in an effort to help reduce the rate of property crimes by documenting, processing, and collecting evidence on scene as well as by assisting the crime laboratory detectives as needed.

All VCST volunteers go through an extensive criminal background check which includes driving history, personal and work references check, and a polygraph examination. Each volunteer is provided with full coverage insurance by the city, that covers accidental injury, liability, and supplemental auto insurance. This is one of the largest budget items in the program. Training for the volunteers is

policy manual. In addition, all VSCT members attend community response training classes and are certified in CPR and first aid on an ongoing basis.

The VCST unit continues to succeed by providing assistance to resource-constrained Denver Police Department. With current economic struggles, DPD admits that employees are not being replaced and if not for the volunteers, most everyone would be facing an increased work load. VCST's participation enables department detectives to quickly and efficiently eliminate search areas in question, allows department personnel to remain in service by freeing up valuable patrol time, and adds remarkable value to the DPD by creating a safer and better city.



Denver Volunteer Crime Scene Team

conducted by the detectives from the Crime Lab and Homicide Bureau. All volunteers are given a comprehensive handbook that includes the ins and outs of the program, as well as the volunteer

For Additional Information:

Pasadena Police Department

Joseph Allard / Kimberly Smith

Financial Crimes Unit

Phone: 626-744-4582

E-mail: jallard@cityofpasadena.net

E-mail: ksmith@cityofpasadena.net

URL: www.ci.pasadena.ca.us/police/**Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department**

Celestine Ratcliff

Volunteer Unit Coordinator

Phone: 704-432-1132

E-mail: cratliff@cmpd.orgURL: www.cmpd.org**El Paso County Sheriff's Department**

Cathryn Richards

Volunteer Coordinator

Phone: 719-520-7216

E-mail: cathrynrichards@elpasoco.comURL: <http://shr.elpasoco.com/>**Denver Police Department**

Mike Rappe

Volunteers in Policing Unit Coordinator

Phone: 720-913-6878

E-mail: mike.rappe@denver.orgURL: www.denvergov.org/Police

VIPS Resources & Products of Interest:

VIPS Program Directory

- Law enforcement agencies can register their volunteer programs and search for others in the online VIPS program directory.
- Citizens can locate volunteer opportunities with law enforcement agencies in their communities. The directory allows users to search by zip code, state, key word, and type of program.

VIPS Resource Library

- Browse and download sample documents from law enforcement volunteer programs, such as application forms, program policies, and volunteer handbooks.

VIPS toVIPS

- This moderated online discussion group was established for law enforcement volunteer program leaders of registered VIPS Programs to share information and ideas. Archives of past discussions are located on the Web site.

All resources and products can be found at www.policevolunteers.org.

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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