

Looking Beyond the Patrol Car: Alternative Ways to Bring Extra Eyes and Ears to the Community

Citizen patrol is one of the most common types of law enforcement volunteer activity. Patrol activities allow volunteers to help prevent crime, increase law enforcement visibility, provide additional services, and build relationships with community members. In light of tightening budgets, many law enforcement agencies are expanding citizen patrols beyond traditional car-based programs to include a variety of other modes of transportation and different types of patrol programs. Bicycles, all terrain vehicles (ATVs), golf carts, and Segways can be significantly less costly to purchase and maintain.

In addition to budgetary advantages, these alternative forms of patrol can also improve community relations. Horses have long helped

to form bonds between law enforcement and community members through mounted patrols. In recent years, many community policing units around the country have found that patrol officers and volunteers on bicycles are viewed as highly approachable by members of the public, helping to build community relationships. Whether on horses, bikes, ATVs, golf carts, or on foot, volunteers can have a better view of what is going on around them, and can be easily approached by community members who may have questions or need assistance.

East Bay, California, Regional Parks Police

The East Bay Regional Park District in California is the nation's largest regional park system. The patrol area of the East Bay Regional Parks Police (EBRPP), a part of the Regional Parks Public Safety Division, includes 65 different parks covering 1,750 square miles in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. At peak summer season, the Public Safety Division is staffed by approximately 500 personnel, including 64 sworn police officers, 195 seasonal lifeguards, 50 industrial firefighters, and 200 members in the Volunteer Trail Safety Patrol.



An East Bay Regional Parks Police Bike Patrol volunteer helps a park visitor with his bicycle helmet.

The mission of the Volunteer Trail Safety Patrol (VTSP) is to “observe, report, and educate.” VTSP members educate visitors about East Bay Regional Park District resources, programs, facilities, and rules; observe and report safety issues, incidents, and emergencies; foster positive relationships among user groups; and assist with public events in the East Bay Regional Park District.

The VTSP is comprised of five groups: the Volunteer Mounted Patrol, Volunteer Bicycle Patrol, Volunteer Hiking Patrol, Volunteer Marine Safety Unit, and Companion Dog Patrol. The different divisions have varying numbers of required hours per month, but they perform the same basic functions outlined in the program mission: observing safety issues, reporting them to dispatch, and educating park visitors. All units wear a standard uniform polo shirt with a VTSP patch. The only exception is the bike patrol volunteers, who typically wear special biking jerseys that are marked VTSP Bike Patrol. While on duty, all volunteers carry an ID card and, depending on their training level and equipment availability, a two way radio. Each patrol group has its own volunteer leadership who coordinate periodic meetings for their group. The overall program is administered by a Volunteer Coordinator who works out of the Operations Division of the Public Safety Department.

All volunteers fill out an initial application and are background checked prior to acceptance. New volunteers are given an orientation, which includes going out on patrol with a current volunteer. They learn the basics of patrol duty and are instructed on how to talk to park users.

Volunteers may choose to take additional training on parking direction and use of two way radios. Period trainings are given on special topics and often feature guest speakers who train volunteers on wildlife, plants, and other aspects of work in the park system.

Riders in the Volunteer Mounted Patrol use their own horses to patrol. The rider and horse must pass a rigorous certification test that is administered by a mounted ERBPP officer. The volunteer is tested on riding skills, and the horse is evaluated for training and temperament. Horses must be able to tolerate a variety of typical park experiences, from children touching the horse to charging off-leash dogs. Volunteers are required to take annual re-certification rides.

Volunteers in the Companion Dog Patrol also require patrol-certification for their pets. Companion dogs and their handlers are tested annually by a certified evaluator using an extended version of the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen® Program, which looks at the dog’s ability to interact with strangers, crowds, wildlife, emergency vehicles, and other scenarios it may encounter in the parks. While on duty, volunteers in the Companion Dog Patrol interact with other



A VTSP Companion Dog Patrol volunteer completes certification tasks with his pet.

visitors who walk dogs to educate them about safety and encourage them to follow the rules about pets in the parks.

The hiking, marine, and bike patrol volunteers do not require certification specific to their patrol. Members of each group provide their own means of transportation and communicate with others in their special interest area. Marine patrol members use kayaks and canoes and encourage visitors to follow park rules governing watercraft use. Hiking and biking volunteers travel the trails, stopping often to engage with park visitors.

All patrol volunteers are eligible to participate in the VTSP Search and Rescue (SAR) Unit. This unit may be activated in the event of a missing person search. SAR Unit volunteers meet monthly for training and often train with other regional SAR units.

Eaton County, Michigan, Sheriff's Office

Eaton County is located in central Michigan, just west of Lansing and has a population of 107,759. The Eaton County Sheriff's Office (ECSO), comprised of 69 sworn officers, is responsible for general law enforcement activities throughout the county and provides contractual police services to Delta and Oneida Townships and the Village of Vermontville.

ECSO has maintained a volunteer program for more than 34 years. Currently, the Volunteers in Police Service program has 38 volunteers. These include unsworn volunteers who serve in victim services, handicapped parking



Eaton County Sheriff's Office Motorcycle Unit Volunteers on a VFW home escort detail.

enforcement, special services, and chaplaincy. Additionally, ECSO has sworn volunteer deputies that are sworn in under the same oath and wear the same uniform as full time deputies.

All ECSO VIPS candidates go through an interview process and thorough background investigation that includes professional references, motor vehicle, and criminal background checks. Upon selection, each volunteer must complete the ECSO VIPS Academy. This course is held one to two days per week for 14 weeks. It covers VIPS policies and procedures, training expectations, personal defensive tactics, first aid and CPR, search and seizure, arrest mechanics, traffic stops, felony traffic stops, and other law enforcement topics. Each unit goes through its own specialized training related to their equipment and must pass an annual recertification.

ECSO has sworn volunteer units dedicated to providing patrol functions and special services on motorcycles and All Terrain Vehicles (ATV). Volunteers in the ATV and



An Eaton County Sheriff's Office ATV Unit Volunteer displays his vehicle at a parade.

Motorcycle Units provide uniformed security and law enforcement presence throughout the county at festivals, car shows, sporting events, ceremonies, and special patrols, like Halloween night. They are trained to work traffic post details and act as county escorts. They often serve in a public relations role at community events and meet and greets. At these events, they talk with community members, display their equipment, and help build trusting relationships between law enforcement and the community.

Motorcycle and ATV Unit volunteers are trained in search and rescue and emergency response procedures. They stand ready to be activated in the event of an emergency or natural disaster to support the Sheriff's Office response efforts.

The Motorcycle Unit is currently made of up of five volunteer deputies, and the ATV Unit is made up of 11 volunteer deputies. ATV and Motorcycle Unit members provide and maintain their vehicles and are responsible for all associated costs. While on duty, ATVs and motorcycles are equipped with red and

blue LED strobe lights and sirens. They are marked with decals to make it clear that they are part of the Sheriff's Office fleet. Volunteers always wear the standard ECSO uniform while on duty, with the exception of some leather wear, such as riding boots, for members of the Motorcycle Unit.

Omaha, Nebraska, Police Department

Omaha is the largest city in the state of Nebraska. Located in the Midwestern United States and on the Missouri River, Omaha's population is 410,000 and is 3,400 square miles. The city boasts a very diverse community that includes Sudanese, Somali, and Latino populations. Omaha is home to five Fortune 500 companies including ConAgra Foods, Union Pacific Corporation, and Mutual of Omaha. The Omaha Police Department (OPD) has 780 officers and 150 civilians.

Omaha's volunteers are active in chaplaincy, Exploring, citizen patrol, handicap parking patrol, and mounted patrol. The Chaplain Corps, started in 1982, serves officers and the community. Chaplains provide individual counseling, crisis response, domestic disturbance assistance, non-emergency transportation, assistance on suicides and attempts, and more.

The crime prevention program at the OPD boasts both Explorers and Citizen Patrol. The 70 Explorers volunteer at police events, dress in mascot costumes, help with physical agility testing, and do whatever is asked of them. Omaha PD has 35 active Citizen Patrols

with 484 active patrol volunteers, up from 300 just three years ago. Patrollers watch neighborhoods and businesses. At Christmas, the patrols drive through the mall parking lots and the Old Market to ward off would-be thieves breaking into cars. Citizen Patrols also provide an extra presence on the first and last days of school and on Halloween. Patrols can also be deployed as part of the department's rapid response team and sometimes work with police to search for a missing child or vulnerable adult. Volunteers undergo criminal background checks and attend training.

The Handicap Parking Patrol was started in 1985, after one of Omaha's volunteers and her handicapped husband had a particularly bad experience looking for parking. Today there are 25 active volunteers on Handicap Parking Patrol. Volunteers receive an identification badge, a ticket book, and educational materials after taking an all day class to educate and train them on the issue.

OPD's Mounted Patrol Unit began in 1989. Officers applying to be in the unit must have served at least three years before applying. There are currently six officers serving. Officers and horses train together.



The Omaha Police Department Equine Facility houses the horses for OPD's mounted patrol.

All horses are donated. It generally takes the horses about one to three months to acclimate to the work. They prepare the horses for anything that could happen outside in the real world. This includes everything from throwing tennis balls at the horse to exploding fireworks in their presence. If the horse makes it through that stage, they then go into the neighborhoods. Here they adjust to people, cars, dogs, etc. and if they cannot handle it, they are given back to their owner.

In 2005, ConAgra Foods donated a barn to the department. The program began taking volunteers at the barn three years ago. There are currently four volunteers. They don't wear uniforms, instead coming dressed in their jeans and boots. The barn manager is an OPD employee and goes through an overview on horse handling on volunteers' first days. She wants to be sure the volunteers are on the same page as her and the patrol officers in terms of handling the horses. Volunteers feed the horses, clean the stalls and animals, and sweep the barn. After the barn manager is comfortable with the way the volunteers handle the horses, they assist her with turnout. Each volunteer works different hours and days, but generally each works in the barn for about three hours when they come in. Volunteers cover both weekdays and weekends.

When the horses are retired, the department contacts the previous owner first to see if they would like the horse back. If not, the department finds a nice home for the horse.

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VIPS Products and Resources**VIPS Add Value While Budgets Decrease**

This publication recognizes the current state of law enforcement budgets and provides suggestions on ways to integrate volunteers to allow sworn and civilian staff to focus on more pressing law enforcement matters. It includes program profiles that offer innovative ideas and activities in law enforcement volunteer programs.

VIPS Program Directory

Law enforcement agencies can register their volunteer programs and search for others with the online VIPS program directory. Citizens also can locate volunteer opportunities with law enforcement agencies in their communities.

VIPS to VIPS

VIPS to VIPS is a moderated discussion group that allows members to post questions and share information. The purpose of VIPS to VIPS is to provide agencies a forum for cross-site mentoring, the exchange of ideas, and to problem-solve challenges. Participation in VIPS to VIPS is limited to contacts from programs registered with the national VIPS programs.

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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