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. 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.
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.
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 the 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 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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