Serving as Extra Eyes and Ears in City Parks

From small inner city parks to acres of open space, each city and town administers the safety and maintenance of its parks differently. This issue of *VIPS in Focus* examines three police departments who use volunteers to patrol the parks and act as extra eyes and ears for the department, ensuring the safety of the community members who use the park.

**Park City, Utah, Police Department**

Park City, Utah, which began as a mining town, has developed into a popular destination for winter sports and movie stars. Located 32 miles east of Salt Lake City, Park City is home to three major ski resorts, the Sundance Film Festival, the United States Ski Team, and the training center for the Australian Freestyle Ski Team. In 2002, Park City was the alpine heart of the winter Olympics, hosted by Salt Lake City. The city’s 8,000 permanent residents, half of which are service workers, are protected by a 30-member police department (PCPD) that is supported by 12 civilians and 20 volunteers.

**Volunteers and the Community**

The PCPD volunteer program has four major components: the diversity outreach program, translation services, the citizen alliance committee, and the park host program. The volunteer program grew out of a desire to improve police services to the burgeoning immigrant community. As the program grew, the diversity outreach program and translation services were developed to bridge the gap between PCPD and the primarily Hispanic immigrants. The citizen alliance committee provides Park City’s residents with the opportunity to interact with law enforcement, schools, social services providers, and community members to develop strong working relationships. The park host program developed as an effort to clean up the city park so it could be enjoyed by everyone.
host volunteers number between 15 and 20 each year, as the program is only active in the spring and summer. Volunteers patrol the park in pairs from 5:00 to 9:00 each evening to serve as extra eyes and ears for PCPD. Some volunteer pairs have regular set shifts; others volunteer when they have time available. The volunteers are issued polo shirts and sweatshirts that make them easily identifiable in the park. They carry department-issued cell phones so they can reach police quickly if they need assistance or to report something suspicious. Each volunteer is issued a fanny pack where they keep a water bottle and paper and pens to take notes on what they observe.

During the development of the park host program, PCPD conducted Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) surveys of the park. The surveys led to the rearrangement of shrubbery and the improvement of lighting, which made the park safer. Once the changes were completed, the volunteers began their patrols, which are augmented by PCPD bike patrols. The interaction between the volunteers and the officers has been positive. During the spring and summer months, the park host volunteers meet once a month to discuss any issues in the park that their patrol may be able to address or alleviate.

Although the number of volunteers fluctuates each season, the volunteer coordinator has seen little turnover in the program. Volunteers return to this program each year for a variety of reasons. Volunteers have said they like the flexibility the park host program provides, enjoy working outside, enjoy interacting with the youths who visit the park, and meeting a variety of people. One of the ways that volunteers are recruited is through ads in the local media. The city’s Web site has information about all of PCPD’s volunteer opportunities.

Improving the Parks
The park host program has greatly improved communication between the community and the police department. Through user surveys, PCPD has shaped its volunteer outreach programs to meet the needs of the community. The volunteers are accepting that the park is safe and generally quiet because of their efforts. Nevertheless, if the park host program were to disappear, the department believes, the drugs, gangs, and graffiti that have been eliminated would eventually make their way back into the park.

Clearwater, Florida, Police Department
Clearwater, Florida lies on the Gulf Coast just outside Tampa. The city covers 26 square miles not counting the unincorporated enclaves within the city limits. The police department (CPD), composed of 260 sworn officers, 100 civilian employees, and 80 volunteers, patrols the city of 110,000. Clearwater’s sunshine and beaches draw tourists from all over the world, and almost 30,000 snowbirds call Clearwater home during the winter.

Volunteer Activities
The department’s volunteer force donated nearly 11,000 hours in 2007, with each volunteer giving at least 16 hours per month. The numerous activities that volunteers can participate in include assisting with traffic accidents, running errands for CPD, conducting homeland security checks of sensitive sites around the city,
patrolling the city’s trail and parks, and assisting in the detective bureau with records, property, and pawn tickets. CPD maintains a roster of volunteer chaplains that help deliver death notices and provide assistance to CPD employees and volunteers. Volunteers are engaged in multiple activities, including the quick response team, which responds to major incidents such as plane crashes, homicides, missing person searches, and traffic deaths. These volunteers are on call 24 hours a day to provide perimeter support and assist first responders.

Day-to-Day Administration
The volunteer program is administered by a full-time sworn officer who reviews applications from potential volunteers. Favorable applications go through a background check that includes driving records, sex offender records, and criminal records from the FBI, the state of Florida and the city of Clearwater. Each applicant who remains in contention after the background check then interviews with the volunteer coordinator and another person who has a good understanding of the volunteer program. After the interview, new volunteers are fingerprinted, and receive security access for the police department; and are fitted for their uniforms. Each year the department conducts a background check for driving records and warrants on each volunteer.

Patrolling the Parks and Trails of Clearwater
The park patrol and trail watch volunteers are managed by the volunteer coordinator. They attend a 15-hour general training academy and receive additional training on operating the various vehicles used for patrol and on the geography of the city. During the training academy they learn how to interact with people they may encounter when on patrol, what to look for, and how to contact CPD for assistance. Volunteers also patrol the city’s beaches in all-terrain vehicles. Volunteers on patrol are easy to identify in CPD-issued uniforms, and before each shift, volunteers stop at the department to check in, retrieve a radio, and sign out a vehicle. Volunteers generally patrol in a vehicle during the week. Driving slowly on paved paths that wind through the parks, volunteers have frequent opportunities to talk to people. Regular visitors to the park feel comfortable approaching the volunteer vehicle to say hello or to ask a question. On weekends, the 30 parks and 14 miles of trails are busier, making it too difficult to use a vehicle to patrol, so volunteers patrol on bicycles.

In addition to being a liaison between park visitors and the police department, the volunteers look for specific things that could prevent people from enjoying the park. They document graffiti so it can be quickly removed. If they find property they will turn it in to detectives who
lost or stolen. Volunteers enforce the city’s leash law by connecting loose dogs with their nearby owners. Anything of suspicion is reported to CPD for further investigation. When homeless and transient people set up camp in the parks and along the secluded trails in the city, volunteers have the option of approaching them and asking them to leave or calling an officer to speak with them. Generally, the loiterers will move on after the volunteer makes the request. Volunteers monitor the radio and during one recent shift learned that they were in the vicinity of wanted a suspect. While maintaining a safe distance, the volunteers watched the suspect until officers arrived. With the help of CPD volunteers acting as the eyes and ears of the police department in the parks and on the trails, residents and visitors can safely enjoy the city’s parks and trails.

**Boise, Idaho, Police Department**

Boise is the capital of Idaho and the most populous city in the state, with approximately 213,000 residents. The city, which sits along the Boise River in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, is home to Boise State University and its 19,600 students. The police department operates on a $40.3 million budget with 325 sworn officers and 82 civilians. The department also maintains a force of 120 volunteers.

**Volunteers to Support and Supplement**

The Boise Police Department provides its volunteers with meaningful assignments. Volunteers assist with security for after-hours meetings at city hall and work at child safety identification events. Volunteers portray McGruff the Crime Dog® at community events and provide administrative support within the department. They help out with crime prevention, community outreach, patrolling parks, and special events. From January through November of 2008, volunteers had provided 7,000 hours of service to the department and contributed 15,000 hours in 2007.

The department recruits its volunteers in many ways including by posting Help Wanted signs on the back of their park patrol vehicle. Volunteers are also recruited through the department’s citizen police academy. After an application is received by the volunteer coordinator, each volunteer is carefully evaluated and screened. All potential volunteers have their references checked and go through an interview. Volunteers who will be working within the four walls of the department are also given a polygraph examination. Once accepted in the program, the volunteer receives an instructional handbook and a volunteer agreement that lays out the expectations of the department and the volunteers. Volunteers then receive orientation that covers identification, parking, appropriate attire, time cards, evaluations, and policies and procedures before being placed in their specific assignment.

**Greenbelt Patrol Volunteers**

One specific cadre of volunteers is known as the Greenbelt Patrol. The
Greenbelt comprises more than 850 acres of dedicated park land on both sides of the Boise River and includes a 25-mile-long bicycle and pedestrian path that connects the many public parks that make up the Greenbelt. The Greenbelt is patrolled year round by uniformed patrol officers, park rangers, and uniformed and plainclothes volunteers. There are approximately 30 uniformed volunteers and 100 plainclothes volunteers. Plainclothes volunteers donate their time and use cell phones to contact police if they observe suspicious activity. A park ranger is always on duty in the Greenbelt and the officers on duty in the park are on bicycles.

Uniformed volunteers patrol the path in marked golf carts or on bicycles. The department provides them with their uniform, a first aid kit, a Nextel Direct radio, and dog leashes. The golf carts are equipped with flotation rings for river rescue. During the warmer months, volunteers work once a week, covering two shifts between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. but only one shift from 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. in the winter.

The primary roles of the Greenbelt volunteers are to provide extra eyes and ears to both the police and the park ranger and provide community outreach efforts. Volunteers receive a handbook that specifically addresses the rules and procedures for the Greenbelt, which is updated annually. Before the start of each shift, volunteers receive a 10 minute briefing, and then they must cover the entire Greenbelt during their shift. If they need assistance they contact the park ranger, who is the volunteer manager during their shifts, and if there is an emergency they can use their radios to contact the officers to respond. They carry the dog leash in the event they find a dog and owner without a leash as the city requires all dogs must be on a leash at all times.

A New and Improved Greenbelt

As popularity of the Greenbelt has grown throughout the decades, it attracted outdoors lovers as well as those who misused the park by camping out or vandalizing the park. Two murders occurred in the park, one as recent as September 2000. With the addition of the Greenbelt patrol volunteers to the park rangers and officers, the Greenbelt has become significantly safer for residents and visitors to enjoy. An added benefit for the department and the volunteer program as a whole is the ability of Greenbelt volunteers to recruit more volunteers while on patrol.
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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