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Sheriff's reserves have task of keeping residents safe

In the depths of a long, cold winter, members of the Washington County Reserve Deputy Sheriff program are gearing up for warmer days.

The county is more than busy in the summertime, with residents and visitors hiking, biking, boating and just plain relaxing in county parks, along waterways and during community celebrations. Residents and visitors are more than ready to work off steam built up being stuck indoors during the cold and the dark. While they play, keeping those residents safe is key.

That's where the Washington County Reserve Deputy Sheriff program comes in. Organized in 1997, today the reserves help patrol 52 miles of the St. Croix River, the county parks and the 50-plus lakes in the county.

"Good bunch of folks. They do an outstanding job for the Washington County Sheriff's Office and the citizens of Washington County," is the way Sheriff William Hutton describes the reserves who supplement the work of the sheriff's deputies.

Hutton and Daniel Ebert, the reserve sergeant leader, stress that this is a volunteer position ("no pay, it's all pride," notes a recruiting poster), albeit one that comes after many hours of training. In 2008, the reserves provided the Sheriff's Office with 6,729 hours of service. Reserves serve on both set and on-call shifts year-round, with a heavier schedule in the summer.

The reserves are highly-trained, meeting in academy training sessions at the county's Law Enforcement Center for 60 hours for the position, which starts in January and continues through May.

Ebert breaks down the volunteers into three groups – law enforcement aspirants, law enforcement retirees, and those who do some other work during the day and volunteer through the reserves.

"They come from all walks of life," Hutton added. Right now, there is a member who works for the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, one as a banker, one as a computer programmer – and others from any number of other careers. "It's folks who are intrigued by the style of work and like to volunteer," Hutton added.

Their assignments are diverse, which is the attraction of the position, Hutton said. Patrolling county parks and waterways are a major task, and doing vacation checks for residents who are out of town are key to volunteer contributions.

Reserves are where the action is during the summer. They supplement law enforcement activities at summer celebrations such as Stillwater's Lumberjack Days and the Washington County Fair. Reserve members were invited to 20 "night out" events in early August, and a reserve deputy was present at each event.

And they are available for emergencies. "They are involved in major incidents that happen in the county," Hutton said, naming the Hugo tornado over Memorial Day weekend 2008 that called on the energy of the reserves.

Because of the diversity of tasks, the reserves require an array of training. After applying and interviewing for the program, and a background check, reserves start training in January, at four hours per session, learning all-terrain vehicle safety, boating safety, snowmobile safety and dive team training. The training includes sessions with the department chaplain, and on the legal code, learning traffic laws and the criminal code. They learn how to process an inmate at the Washington County Jail and how to secure an accident or crime scene.

"There is a lot to know about the Sheriff's Office," Hutton said, "from the correctional end to the courts end of it."

One of the most important tasks that both Ebert and Hutton cite is patrolling the St. Croix River, which is the county's eastern border. After Lake Minnetonka along the metropolitan area's western edge, it is the busiest waterway in the metro area. The reserves are a major tool in promoting safety on the riverway, Hutton said.

The reserves learn that much of law enforcement is simply interacting with residents, Hutton said. "It is not all cops and robbers."

That is valuable, as many of the reserves become members of a law enforcement team. "This is valuable experience, as many of the reserves become members of a law enforcement team as they move to full- or part-time licensed law enforcement positions," Ebert said.

Both Hutton and Ebert noted that the program is for those who want to offer their services to the community. "There is the recognition factor, as well," Ebert said. "Their compensation is the recognition and thanks from the community," he said.

“I’m super pleased we have them,” Hutton said. “There is an instant pool of extra help for us during a crisis, and also a great resource for us on the river and in the parks.”

Information and an application can be obtained at www.co.washington.mn.us, Sheriffs Office, Volunteers, Reserve deputies, or contact Deputy James Gribble at 651-430-7857 or Sergeant Jerry Cusick at 651-430-7810. Applications close in the fall for the following year's cohort.

Photo attached in jpeg format:

Winter snowmobile patrol is part of the tasks of the Washington County Reserve Deputy Sheriff program.