

Getting the Goods

Resources for law enforcement equipment aren't limited to federal grants

by **Melanie Hamilton**
Police Magazine

Much of the equipment deemed essential for law enforcement today didn't exist until recently, so it costs a lot more money just to run a police department at what is now considered the bare minimum.

Gone are the days of simple two-way radios and revolvers. Now each officer must carry a multitude of less-lethal weapons in addition to a gun and probably a PDA. Constant necessary upgrades to computers at police stations and in cars require more hardware and software and more money to acquire them. And unfortunately, as we all know, money doesn't grow on trees.

While grants are useful, they aren't the only means by which to acquire funding for equipment.

Clearing Houses

Equipment that no one else wants might not seem like a desirable commodity. But businesses and the military often find themselves with surplus products that might as well be used by law enforcement agencies that need them and are willing to use them.

The National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources (NAEIR) is a nonprofit organization that collects donated items from corporations with surplus goods and distributes them to schools and government agencies for a small annual membership fee, which covers administrative and distribution costs.

A fee of \$595 provides a law enforcement agency with five 200-page catalogs to select items from throughout the year as well as additional chances to order goods. The products are free, but if you can't pick them up at the main distribution center in Galesburg, Ill., you'll have to cover shipping and handling. Details are available at www.naeir.org.

Although it's not brand new, Department of Defense excess military property is available through a federal dispersal program. Law enforcement agencies can bid on used military equipment on a first-come, first-served basis.

Some restrictions apply, but the basic requirements include agreeing to use the equipment only for law enforcement purposes, to begin using the equipment within one year of receipt, and to continue using it for at least one year.

Sheriff Brent Oleson of the Juneau County (Wis.) Sheriff's Department has found this service extremely useful.

"Over a period of years we've gotten five boats, two Humvees, a vehicle for park patrol, and a seven-year-old military ambulance that we're converting into a tactical vehicle. It has only 14,000 miles on it. Everything we've acquired from them has been in excellent condition."

An agency can become a part of this program by writing a letter to the state coordinator requesting that the agency be accepted for participation in the 1033 program. The state coordinator then prepares a data sheet for the requesting agency, has it signed by the chief or sheriff of the department, and then sends it on to the U.S. Department of Defense Law Enforcement Support Office (LESO). Program information is available online at www.nlectc.org/equipment/1033.html.

Fundraising and Donations

Accepting money or equipment from community members and local businesses may seem like a simple and obvious solution to budgetary problems that make equipment scarce. But many law enforcement agencies shy away from these practices.

"Frankly, local fundraising, in and of itself, is probably of minimal value," says Chief James Montgomery of the Bellevue (Wash.) Police Department. "If it's for a very unique, targeted purpose, it meets that purpose. But as far as an overall communitywide or organizational benefit, it's pretty minimal."

Chief Craig Steckler of the Fremont (Calif.) Police Department agrees that it's too difficult to raise enough money through fundraising for large departments' needs using fund-raising efforts alone.

"I need \$5 million a year to get back to delivering a decent amount of police services. You can't fundraise \$5 million a year," says Steckler.

But even if Fremont PD were to use fundraising to help buy equipment, the amount that could be raised probably wouldn't go very far because of the sheer number of police officers on staff.

"It's a little more difficult to do fundraising at a larger department. I mean, what are you fundraising for? A laptop for a car? I've got 65 cars to equip, which would mean funding 65 laptops."

However, the Bellevue Police Department has had success in using fundraisers to supplement other resources for smaller needs such as the DARE program. An annual event at a local bowling alley helps to fund the department's anti-drug program

in schools. Community members came up with the idea, and they organize the event in conjunction with Officer Bob Oliver, the department's single DARE officer.

Garden Grove (Calif.) Police Department Chief Joseph Polisar warns of the political and ethical minefield of soliciting donations.

"It's very difficult for a chief of police, no matter where you are, to approach people in his community with his hat in his hand seeking donations. It's something chiefs should not have to do or be expected to do," says Polisar.

But some chiefs have found that if people in the community come to them about donating goods or services, they don't have to turn them away.

Chief William Harvey of the Lebanon (Pa.) Police Department recently benefited from a local body shop that offered to refurbish some specialized vehicles for the department's emergency unit. The company only asked that the cost of materials be covered. It donated all of its labor.

"I don't want to go gladhanding," Harvey says, "but when you have people make an offer like that it's hard to refuse."

And the relationship that develops between a law enforcement agency and a local business can help community members feel good about themselves and the community as a whole.

Dep. John Grennon of the Suffolk County (Ind.) Sheriff's Department has also found that local businesses can be a great source of funding. "I chaired the public safety AED task force for Massachusetts for a number of years, and big companies are happy to buy these units for public safety," he says.

Harvey has also heard of local businesses having donated automatic external defibrillators, although he hasn't yet been approached by an interested donor.

Corporate Donations

Baltimore's Inner Harbor Police Department was lucky enough to receive gloves from Gorgonz Performance Workwear. Because the company's headquarters is located on the Inner Harbor Police beat, employees saw officers riding by on their bicycles and thought they might be able to benefit from the Gorgonz law enforcement line.

Paige Kimos, in charge of Gorgonz public relations, approached the department about testing the company's new gloves and appearing in photos for company literature.

"There was no real problem getting it approved," says Inner Harbor PD Sgt. Henry Wagstaff. "There was no money involved and we were simply testing the company's products."

Wagstaff notes that because his is a small department, the cash value of the gloves is not as significant as it would be for a larger agency. But they are appreciated and useful nonetheless. The primarily bicycle patrol might not have been as receptive to the idea of a corporate donation if the items offered had been motorcycle helmets, or some other item not specifically suited to the department's needs.

Evaluating Usefulness

Before deciding which equipment and services to request or accept, it's a good idea to make sure your department and surrounding agencies will actually benefit from them.

Sheriff Brent Oleson of the Juneau (Wis.) County Sheriff's Department recently received money to replace analog radios that had broken. He didn't see a need for upgrading to digital radios because every other agency in his area is still using analog systems.

However, it can also be useful to consider accepting items that might not immediately fit your department's needs in their current form if they can be repurposed.

The Lebanon Police Department's new emergency vehicles were originally ambulances donated by a local manufacturer. The vehicles, now outfitted with law enforcement equipment and transformed with donated body shop work, are ready for police duty.

When deciding how to fund and acquire equipment for any law enforcement agency, administrators agree it's worth the effort to pursue as many realistic avenues as possible.

© 2004 Police magazine. Used with permission. This article appeared in the November 2004 issue of Police magazine, www.policemag.com.