

Reserve Officers on Bikes

By Gene Williams

Many small to medium size departments have utilized reserve officers for years. Doctors, plumbers, pastors, corporate businessmen, and others often want to volunteer their time and skills to the local police department. They usually have full-time jobs, yet something draws them to serving their communities as reserve police officers.

These men and women receive the same training as their full-time counterparts. There is typically a minimum work requirement, for instance, 24 hours per month, which they fit into their busy schedules. Some actually patrol, while others provide functions for the department in lieu of patrol, thus reducing costs in other areas or freeing up a regular officer for patrol duty.

One trend that has become increasingly popular is utilizing reserve officers for bike patrol. Many of these volunteer officers are available to work only on weekends or selected holidays, which is usually when extra manpower is most sorely needed. During high school football season, which is more of a religion than a sport in Texas, reserve officers on bikes patrol parking lots and breezeways, allowing their full-time counterparts to continue with their regular duties.

The presence of reserve officers on bikes is also advantageous during parades. Roving teams of reserves on bikes reduce the need for—and cost of—overtime, and places the reserve officers more in touch with their surroundings. They have time to stop and visit with the citizens, their neighbors, sitting along the parade route. They can take a moment to speak to children about bicycle safety. Not only do other members of the community see professional public safety cyclists, they also see their neighbors donating time to the community.

Reserve officers are an asset to any department in the field of public safety cycling. At a cost of less than \$2,000, a department can purchase two bicycles and equip its designated bike officers with tools to promote not only the department and its philosophies, but also its dedication to serving the community.

In Redman, OR members of the police reserve are an active force on bicycles. They are assigned to details such as patrolling city parks, providing a police presence at community outreach programs and non-profit events, directing traffic and assisting with crowd control functions at large sporting events or concerts.

The Redmond Police is fortunate to have a reserve unit staffed by highly committed and dedicated individuals who take great pride in their work. In 2003, reserve officers donated more than 4,354 hours of volunteer service at a cost savings to the City of Redmond of more than \$130,000.

The City of Hempstead, TX utilizes its reserve force in much the same way. During football games, the parking lots are patrolled by reserve officers on bikes. On weekends, the chief will assign four reserves to bike patrol, backed up by a reserve officer in a patrol vehicle as dedicated support.

Usually the bike team targets specific crime areas as dictated by the chief. This leaves the full-time officers to attend to their nightly routine, yet the department is supplemented by five extra officers to focus on problem areas. It is amazing how quiet the streets become when word gets around the neighborhood that the "bike cops" are out.

In Mountain Home (MH), ID the bike unit was founded in 1995 with the donation of two bikes and the assistance of the MH reserve officers. After attending a 32-hour training program, two reserve officers began patrolling local parks, the downtown area, and the residential districts.

Putting the reserve officers on bike was one of the MHPD's first community policing initiatives, and the one-on-one contact with the citizens ensured its success. Members of the community embraced this proactive approach to policing, feeling that the officers were making a difference, and, in fact, they were. They were more visible and approachable, and, unhampered by traffic and congestion, were often the first to arrive on the scene of a call for service.

Their proactive approach and positive community contacts led to the expansion of the bike unit to include regular officers as well as reserve officers. All regular patrol officers are now trained and assigned to patrol on bikes in rotation with the reserve officers.

In spring, summer, and fall, the reserve officers' primary duty is bike patrol. All reservists are required to complete at least 16 hours on bike patrol prior to patrolling in a motor vehicle—a requirement that is not difficult to enforce, as most of the officers genuinely enjoy being on bike patrol. The MHPD has also integrated bicycles into their citizens on patrol program.

As a testament to its success, the majority of the MHPD bike program has been funded by the community in the form of donations of bikes, uniforms, helmets, and other accessories. The department currently has ten mountain bikes to carry out the assignments of the bike patrol unit.

At various times, there are as many as four officers on bike patrol, pedaling the streets of Mountain Home. Their duties include bicycle safety training, running radar in residential areas and school zones, working special events, and conducting surveillance of suspicious activities.

The fact that reservists can be an effective supplement to any department is documented by the actions of the Civil Guard, Jerusalem District Police Force, Israel. According to IPMBA member and Instructor Michael Satlow, a 10-year veteran of this unit (and a four-year veteran of the Bike Patrol Unit), this para-police unit was founded in 1974 in response to a series of bombings. It is a fully voluntary civilian organization working in tandem with the police.

The civil guard has both non-uniformed and specialized uniformed divisions which serve together with regular police officers in traffic, uniform patrol, youth, bike patrol and bomb disposal. Michael has been going out regularly with career police officers to patrol downtown Jerusalem, the most sensitive area of the city and the scene of the vast majority of bombings.

Using civil guard officers for routine police work enables regular officers to address more serious situations and threats. The bikes have helped dramatically reduce the response times of reserve officers during peak traffic hours and have facilitated closer relationships with store owners, which in turn have resulted in a valuable source of information.

Due to their inherent qualities of speed, stealth, and easy penetration of congested areas, bikes offer an effective weapon in the fight against urban terror. As of 2005, there are two regular police bike patrol units and over 30 civil guard units in Israel, in both urban and rural environments, and an attempt is underway to expand the police bike patrol in central Jerusalem.

Reserve officers can also play a role in the growing field of tactical emergency medicine. Many reserve officers are full-time members of other public safety departments, especially fire and EMS agencies. Because of their familiarity with emergency procedures and their experience in working with police officers, they are ideal candidates for augmenting the police bike patrol. Their specialized skills can add breadth to the bike patrols.

Although the majority of US law enforcement agencies deploy bike teams, many of their fire or EMS counterparts do not. By integrating reserve officers who are also trained medics into bike patrols, the jurisdiction will benefit not only from the added police protection, but also from having trained EMS pre-hospital providers on patrol.

These units are capable of responding to medical calls in downtown areas, parks, shopping malls, airports, etc. These same units are invaluable during special events such as sporting events, large conventions, concerts, fairs, and festivals. Incorporating reserve bike officers from fire and EMS agencies in such situations will enhance police presence and facilitate emergency medical response in these congested venues.

In a crowd control or other situation in which police officers may be at risk, the presence of a medic within the bike unit ensures that an injured officer will receive immediate and perhaps life-saving medical attention.

If EMS/reserve personnel are to be deployed in this manner, it is highly recommended that they undergo specific training in the fields of CS, Taser, and/or OC deployment in order to not only be able to function side-by-side with their full-time counterparts, but also to understand the effects of these tools and the specific treatments associated with exposure to them.

They should also be certified in Tactical Operational Medical Support and receive specialized EMS cycling training such as that offered by the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA).

In a time of shrinking budgets, it is the responsibility of the law enforcement agency to think creatively about how to maximize its resources. Volunteers are often under-utilized or thought incapable of being used for “real” police work. Agencies such as the Redmond, Hempstead, and Mountain Home Police Departments have discovered quite the opposite.

They attract highly motivated, capable people to their reserve units and retain them by placing them in positions of responsibility. It may or may not be possible to place reservists in such specialty units as K9, SWAT or Investigations, but if appropriately trained, they can become tremendous assets to the bike unit. The satisfaction volunteers gain from being part of something special—the bike unit—can result in long-term benefit to the department.

A minimal investment of funds from the department and time from the reservist will result in a positive outcome measured by a supportive community. The IPMBA encourages and welcomes full-time and reserve police officers to join the exciting and rewarding field of police and EMS cycling.

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