

Citizens on Patrol: The Eyes and Ears for Law Enforcement in Hillsborough County

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Abstract

This paper will describe a program that many agencies are starting to look to for additional help in patrolling neighborhoods. The program is called "Citizens on Patrol" (COP). When law enforcement agencies are told to cut back on their budgets, agencies have to come up with ways to patrol and answer calls for service. Citizens on Patrol are the eyes and ears for Law Enforcement. Agencies supply the cars, uniforms, radios and training. All the citizens have to do is supply the time. Many agencies are using these citizens in different ways. Some use them to patrol neighborhoods only, while others use them for directing traffic at minor accident scenes.

Introduction

Each year more and more people are re-locating to the state of Florida. One of the most sought after areas, for this transition, is Hillsborough County (Tampa). From the law enforcement perspective, as the population increases so does the demand for law enforcement service. Unfortunately, the increase in law enforcement officers has not kept pace with the rapid growth experienced in Florida. In Hillsborough County the officer to population ratio is 1.62 per 1,000 (McCarthy, 2007). Nationally, the ratio is 2.1 officers for every 1000 persons. Law enforcement leaders are forced to meet the challenge of these obstacles by creative means.

The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office already has volunteers that donate many patrol hours each and every month. The Reserve program (Reserve I and II) at the present time has approximately two hundred members. These volunteer deputies help out at major events (football games, parades and fairs) and also for saturations of areas when needed. These volunteers usually have day-time jobs and can only volunteer at night or on the weekends.

With upcoming budget cuts, this agency will have to come up with new ways to help with calls for service. Deputies at this time do not have the time to check on vacation watches, contact neighborhood watch groups or do business contacts, they are too busy running from call to call.

The Volunteer "Citizens on Patrol Program" will contribute to the effective management to those calls. In addition, there are several other calls for service such as: school crossings, traffic control, and special events that can be handled by this program. This will ultimately free up deputies for higher priority calls.

Citizens who are interested in this program are screened, processed, trained, and made available to assist where possible.

The following considerations need to be addressed during the planning phase of program implementation:

- What geographical areas will be covered (residential and/or high crime)?
- What type of calls will they be responsible for handling?
- What type of training should they be subjected to?
- Will their omnipresence reduce crime in the areas that they are assigned?
- How many hours should they be required to volunteer?

Literature Review

“Citizens on Patrol” is a generic name used by many to describe a special group of volunteers that help law enforcement. These are citizens that are trained by a local law enforcement agency, to patrol their communities, acting as their eyes and ears for law enforcement. Citizens on Patrol is not a new program, it has been around for over 20 years with an estimated number of 75,000 volunteers nationwide (National Association of Citizens on Patrol, 2007).

The National Association for Citizens on Patrol was founded in 1999. Their newsletter explains some of the jobs that volunteers help with. Volunteers patrol the communities looking for suspicious activity, aid stranded motorists and most important, increase the level of comfort for those who see the extra units on the street. They conduct routine checks of businesses and vacation checks for homeowners who are away.

Palm Springs Police Department in Southern California uses their volunteers to assist with parades, crime labs and impounding of vehicles for the traffic division (Palm Springs Police Department, 2007).

The ratio of police officers to citizens in Topeka, Kansas is one officer for every 6,000 citizens. The citizens of Topeka have learned that law enforcement officers cannot be everywhere. These citizens are given a four hour session on the do's and don'ts of patrolling a neighborhood (Geisler, 2007).

In Gold Canyon, Arizona, Sheriff Chris Vasquez says they are 175 deputies short, so to fill the gap they looked to citizens on patrol. Maintaining a police presence with unarmed volunteers apparently has an effect on crime. Citizens on Patrol are being credited with the reduction of crime by 50%. These citizens receive an eight hour classroom education on the program and also an evasive driving class. During the eight hour class, they are taught to be good observers and good witnesses. Sometimes these citizens use radar guns to catch speeders, but they do not write tickets, rather they mail warnings to the violators (Kasindorf, 2007).

In reading the articles about the program, it appears that agencies around the country use these volunteers in many different ways. Some are using these volunteers on the streets to help out; some use them to man the front desk so deputies are free to work the streets and some are used for clerical duties.

Method

The purpose of this research is to determine the extent that citizens can be used in Hillsborough County to help out law enforcement. The information that was collected through surveys was sent out to law enforcement agencies around the state of Florida, which have a volunteer program. The survey instrument focuses on the size of the volunteer program, applicant requirements, training required, duties undertaken and volunteer hours required every month. Training and the background check procedure is also addressed in the survey instrument. Additionally, specific questions regarding crime reduction and program issues are included on the survey. By analyzing the survey data, useful information will be garnered to help evaluate whether the citizen on patrol program is working. Also, are the training and the background checks uniform?

To accomplish this, eight surveys were sent out and followed up with phone interviews when clarification was needed.

Results

There were eight Law Enforcement Agencies that were surveyed, as listed below.

- Pasco County Sheriff's Office
- Palm Bay Police Department
- Citrus County Sheriff's Office
- Cape Coral Police Department
- Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office
- Delray Beach Police Department
- Lee County Sheriff's Office
- St. Pete Police Department

Each of these Agencies has had a volunteer program in place, for many years. The survey was sent to each of these agencies. There was an 88% response rate.

One of the first questions that were asked of each agency was, "What are the general requirements for each applicant"? The reason for this question was because the citizens would possibly be doing some type of physical work. Also, they would be checking on residences where the homeowners are away on vacation. Having someone with a criminal past would not be a good idea. Five of the agencies require the minimum age to be eighteen years old. The other two agencies require their volunteers be at least twenty-one years old. All agencies conduct a background check looking for arrest and / or convictions. One interesting item was that not every agency requires a valid driver's license. If a person does not have a driver's license they are not allowed to drive the car but are used as the second person in the car. They are also used at the offices to answer phones or help with filing reports.

When it comes to training of these citizens, every agency does it differently. The number of training hours ranged from three to eighty. One agency had "On the Job Training" with no classroom training other than an orientation. Most agencies had training that covered office procedures, parking enforcement, traffic control, defensive driving, communications and some patrol techniques. For the programs that write non criminal reports or minor traffic crashes, they also had a report writing class.

The type of training that each agency gave their citizens regulated the types of calls that they were allowed to handle. The traffic control class was given so they could direct traffic while an officer was handling the crash scene. This would free up other officers to go to other calls. The traffic control class was also used because some agencies used their volunteers, at major events, to direct traffic. Some volunteers were taught the Florida State Statute numbers for handicapped and fire lane parking, so they could write tickets to violators. These volunteers were used to patrol shopping centers and malls. At no time are these volunteers used to respond to a crime where a suspect is present. This is also stressed in the training. The main use is neighborhood patrol. Volunteers patrol residential neighborhoods looking for any suspicious activities and if they see any, they immediately call for a law enforcement officer.

The number of hours that each agency requires their members to volunteer each month varied. Three agencies required up to sixteen hours each month, while one agency had no minimum, as long as the members kept active. Every agency understands that these are volunteers and that some months they may not meet the required hours.

When it comes to the geographical areas to patrol in, of course each agency was different. One agency had flexible zone assignments. So the volunteers could be in a different location each day. Another agency has six districts, so the volunteers are placed in a district close to their homes to patrol. Most of the agencies have the volunteers patrol their own neighborhoods first and if there are extra cars available, then the extra cars are used in other areas.

Surprisingly, when asked if crime has been affected in the areas that are patrolled by these volunteers, only one agency had an analysis done and advised that they had a 75% reduction in crime. This agency was one of the ones that had the volunteers patrol their own neighborhood. All the other agencies advised that they too had a reduction, but none of them had any numbers to show. One agency advised that last year their volunteers put in 32,042.75 hours at a savings to their county of \$601,442.00.

Discussion

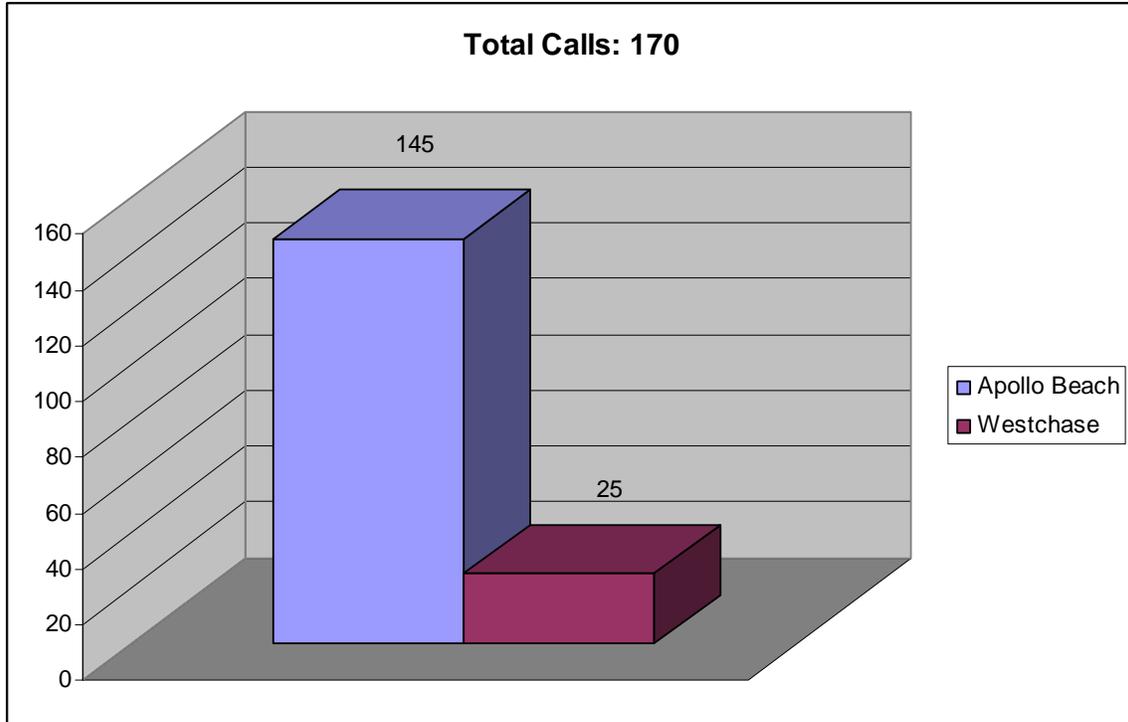
While gathering the information for this report, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office started their Volunteer Citizen Patrol Program (VCP). After reviewing the other agencies' requirements the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office adopted the following requirements for their volunteers:

1. Must be 19 years of age;
2. Must be a United States citizen;
3. Must possess a valid Florida driver's license;
4. Must have no more than 5 moving traffic violations within the last three years and no more than 8 moving traffic violations in a lifetime;
5. Must have no illegal drug use within the last 3 years and never sold drugs;
6. Must pass a criminal background check;
7. Must have an honorable discharge from the military;
8. Must provide medical clearance from a physician for participation; and
9. Must meet the Florida minimum visual standards for licensing in order to operate a VCP vehicle.

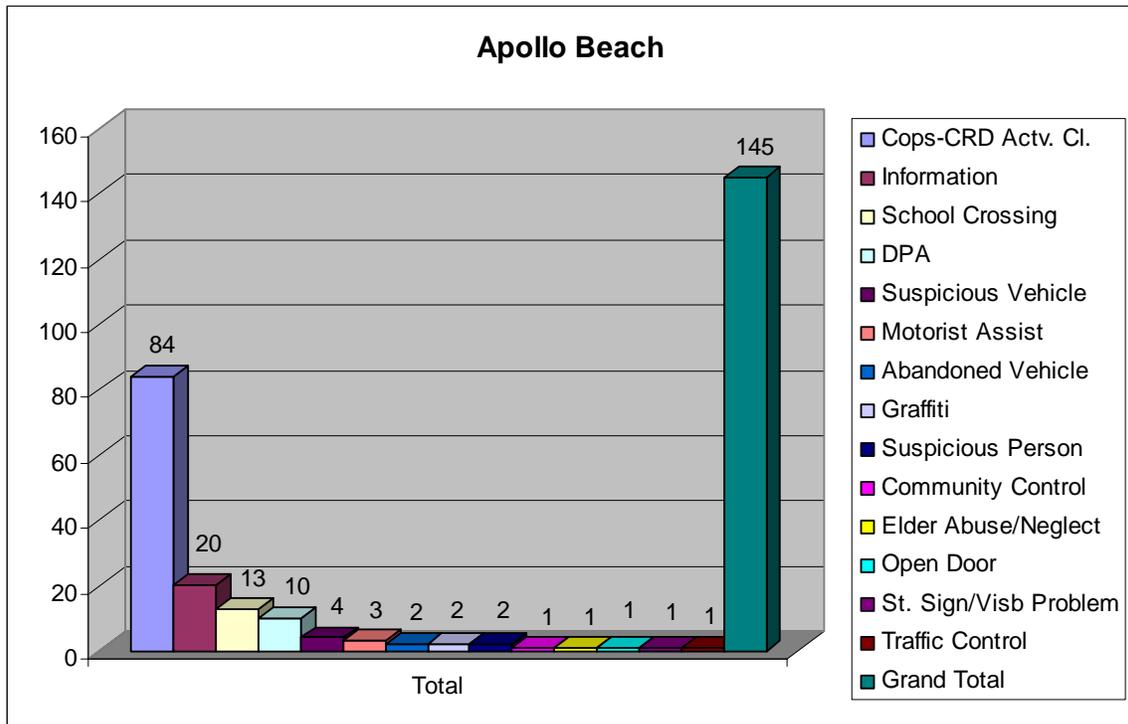
Once selected, the volunteer attends a forty hour training class where they are taught defensive driving along with classes on how to patrol neighborhoods, check homes for vacation watches, traffic control assistance and crossing guard duties.

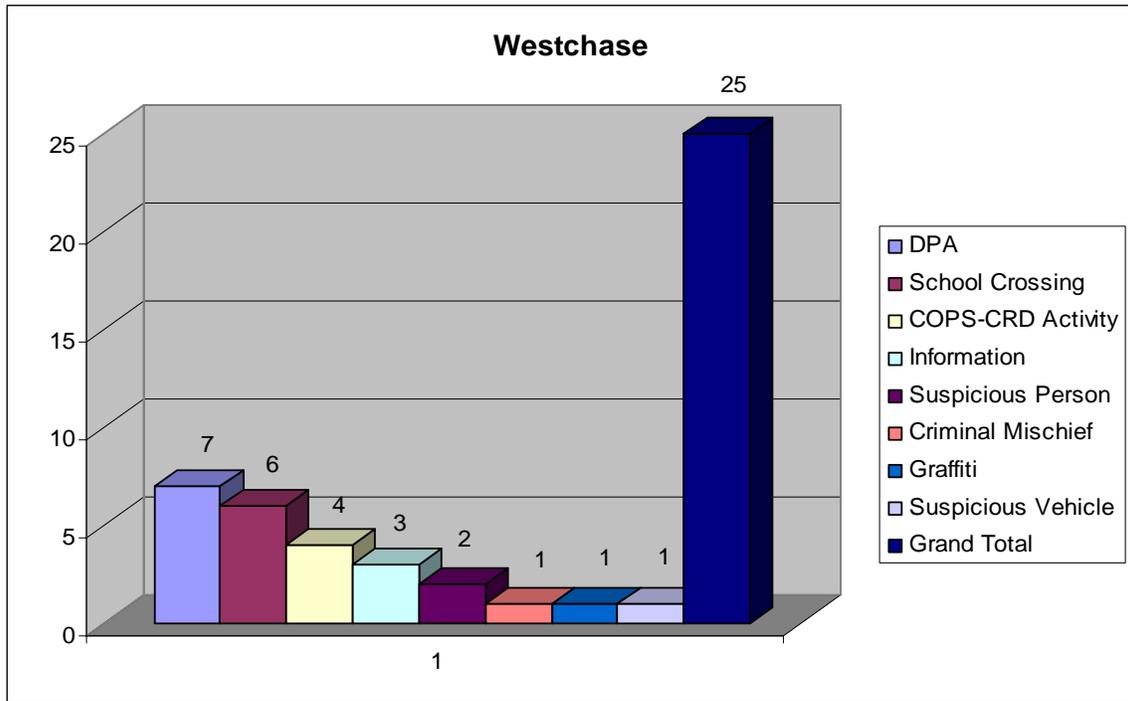
After the first class of twenty-five graduated, they were placed in two areas to patrol. These two areas, one on the west end of the county (Westchase) and the other one on the south end (Apollo Beach), were selected because of the amount of property crimes that were being committed between the hours of 0600 – 1700.

The VCP commenced service March 8, 2007 in these two areas. From March 8, 2007 to August 31, 2007 there were 170 calls for service assigned to VCP. That means that there were 170 calls for service that a deputy was not dispatched to, freeing them up for other calls for service. Below is a breakdown and comparison of calls for service, in these two areas.

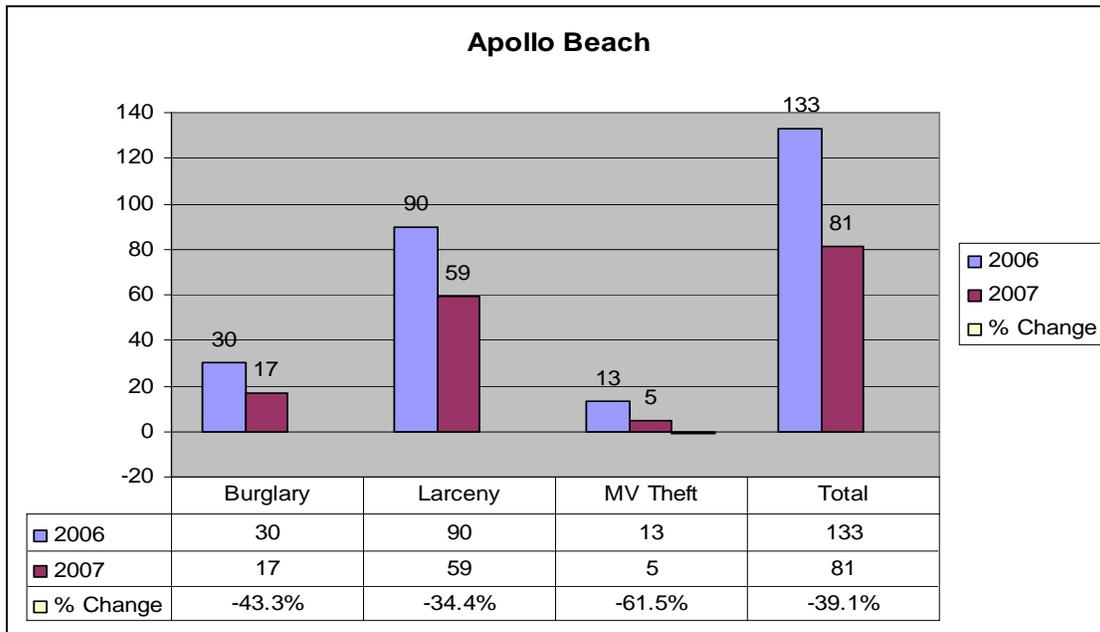


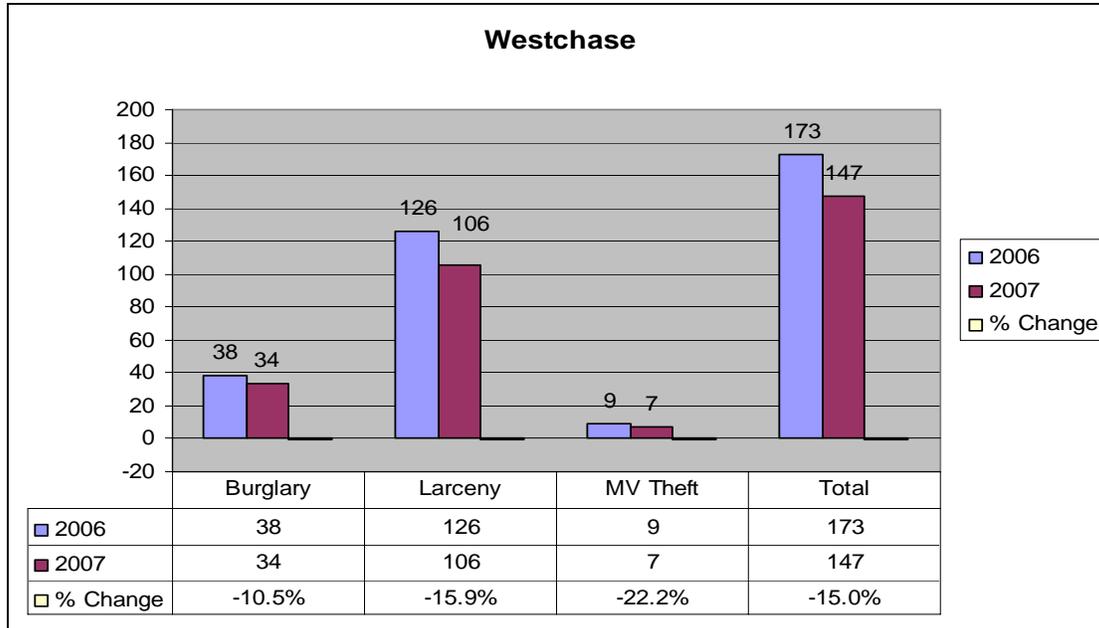
Below is a breakdown of calls by call type.





In reviewing property crimes for March – July 2007, compared to the same time frame for 2006, the statistics show a decrease for both Apollo Beach and Westchase. Apollo Beach had a decrease in property crimes of 39%, while Westchase had a decrease of 15%.





The drop in property crime for both Apollo Beach, as well as Westchase, is a good indication that the program is working in Hillsborough County.

At the present time, the only problem that the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office is experiencing is in recruiting. As indicated in the above charts, Apollo Beach had a lot more activity than Westchase. There are currently no volunteers that live in the Westchase area. The volunteers that have been patrolling the area live in other areas of the county. This may have had a direct affect on the amount of activity and/or the lesser percentage of a decrease in crime, as persons that patrol their own neighborhoods are more likely to take ownership of that area and are more geographically familiar with the area. Not to mention, that persons that are patrolling familiar areas are more likely to know where problems exist.

As with every program, there are some problems. The other agencies advised that they have experienced different problems. Some programs have expanded to 5000 members. Some of these members do not feel that they are part of the Sheriff's Office. Another agency warns about the "wanna-be" or rogue volunteer. Through proper supervision and documentation, these can be weeded out.

In this time, when agencies have to reduce manpower due to budget cuts, the Volunteer Citizen on Patrol Program can assist in helping answer calls for service.

Captain Al Greco has been in law enforcement since 1980 with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. Currently, Al supervises the Homeland Security Division which also encompasses the Reserve or Volunteer Deputies. Al has a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from the University of South Florida.

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APPENDIX A

Research Survey
Citizens on Patrol Program

Name of Agency: _____

1. Does your agency have "Citizens on Patrol Program"? Yes _____ No _____
2. How many members are in the program? _____
3. What are the general requirements for the applicant?
(age, convictions, arrest, driver's license)

4. Number of required hours each month? _____
5. Is there a training program? _____ If so how many hours is the program? _____
6. What type of training? _____
7. What type of duties and responsibilities will they be assigned to?
 - a. Administrative duties:

 - b. Patrol duties:

8. Are they assigned to one area of the city or county, or can they drive any where?

9. Has crime been affected in these areas? _____
10. If so, how has it been affected? (What percentage up or down, if you have the numbers) _____
11. Are there any negatives to this program?

