

The Desert Sun

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DHS community volunteers time to strapped police force

DESERT HOT SPRINGS – Without a badge, gun or handcuffs, Craig Spector-Howell opens the door of the Desert Hot Springs police station and walks in to grab a radio before heading out on patrol.

Howell is not a police officer or paid security guard — he is one of about 21 volunteers who donates time patrolling the streets and/or working inside the police station on Pierson Boulevard.

Many of the people here donating their time are seniors, and some are also retired police officers, said Spector-Howell, who has been volunteering with the Desert Hot Springs Police Department since 2010.

Inside the station, 68-year-old Shirley Roberts works the front desk, answering phones and processing paperwork such as pawn slips and electronic citation forms.

"It's something to do and help was needed," said Roberts. "I started doing filing and pawn slips and it went on from there."

Roberts, who works as support staff, has been volunteering at the station for nine years, she said.

She is usually the first face people see when they walk in the door, and may be the first person they speak to when calling the station's general non-emergency phone line.

At the back of the station, Jim Knabb, community resource specialist with the Desert Hot Springs police, sits behind a desk and accesses the station's volunteer management system.

Each one of the volunteers has access to this software and can use it to partner up with others and schedule a shift, Knabb said.

More help needed

Knabb remembers at the height of the current volunteer program there were about 25 Citizens on Patrol, but the numbers have declined in recent years.

Citizens on Patrol first appeared in Desert Hot Springs in 1999.

There are a core group of people who have been here a long time but "it's the citizens on patrol (COP) we really need," Knabb said.

"Some of our older COPs have retired, other COPs lost their day jobs, and I've had some lose their houses because of the economy," he said, adding that people just don't seem to have the time to volunteer as much as they used to.

About 14 volunteers currently work on patrol.

The police department has been in the public spotlight since December when city leaders, facing the threat of insolvency, declared a fiscal emergency and opted to cut most police salaries by more than 22 percent. As a result, many officers left their positions and many more are expected to follow before replacements are hired.

To date, former chief Kate Singer, two high-ranking commanders and at least three others have left the department because of the pay cuts.

The city has 22 police officers and at least 10 prospective officers are in the hiring process, said Desert Hot Springs police Chief Dan Bressler, who returned April 28 from medical.

The police department will run "with or without volunteers. However, they make everyone's lives a whole lot easier and we can do a lot more with them," Knabb said.

Buying time

Police officers are busy answering calls for service and "they don't have a lot of time doing vacation checks and things like that," he said.

Volunteers do everything from court runs and vacation checks to working traffic control and helping maintain perimeters during crime scene investigations and parades.

The court runs alone help give officers two to three hours to focus on calls for service, said Spector-Howell. Volunteers are required work about eight hours a month but many donate much more of their time, he said.

"Shirley (Roberts) works 40 hours a week and we have others who put in a lot more time than they are required," Knabb said.

All volunteers are given fingerprint-background checks and put through a community police academy before starting, he said.

"We really are supporting the things that tie up the pay staff," Knabb said. "If there is an incident when there is a shooting or traffic collision, we probably are going to call in a COP to help. They are not required to come but they always do."

Behind the wheel of the volunteer patrol car, Spector-Howell drives the streets of the city while listening to the police radio.

A call comes in about a man possibly carrying a gun near a grocery store, but he continues up toward a residential neighborhood where some homeowners requested vacation checks.

"They really have a tough job," said Spector-Howell. "When you look at L.A., the city police and sheriff (deputies), they are always traveling in twos but our cops are going out by themselves many times."

Spector-Howell said he would only respond to the radio call if officers request help and need to establish a perimeter. However, the radio chatter dies down as officers resolve the situation without incident.

"This really is a nice town," said Spector-Howell.

"This is why I do it."

Want to volunteer?

To learn more about the Desert Hot Springs Police Department's volunteer program, call Community Resource Specialist Jim Knabb at (760) 329-2904 Ext. 340