

The Citizen Volunteer

What can an average citizen do to assist their local law enforcement?

Derived from an interview with:

Lieutenant Justin Hoyal

Public Information Officer, Unified Police of Greater Salt Lake

There are many careers in the field of criminal justice. A job as a patrol officer, security guard, judge, or probation officer quickly comes to mind. Yet an often forgotten and crucial member of our justice system is the citizen. The uncompensated efforts of average individuals are not only helpful to our officers, they are in high demand. There are several opportunities available to those who wish to help that make a meaningful impact on the community. Yet many citizens, including myself, have no idea how to help. To shine some light on what can be done, I requested to meet with the Unified Police Department's Public Information Officer, Lieutenant Justin Hoyal on the 27th of November, 2012.

Lieutenant Hoyal became an officer after his first year of college. It only took one ride-a-long as part of his criminal justice class to convince him to join the force. He worked several years in the homicide unit before serving in his current office as the Unified Police Department's Public Information Officer. In this position, Lieutenant Hoyal relays information to the media and public on behalf of the police department. Most likely when a news story airs concerning a "big case," he is the officer who provided the key information presented. He is also a major part of the Unified Police Department's public outreach program and public events. Even though he wouldn't be considered a "Citizen Volunteer," Lieutenant Hoyal provided a lot of key information on what it would take for an average person to fill that important role.

Community Events

"We are always looking for the community support." That one of the first things Hoyal wanted to point out. The problem is, however, that the average American simply doesn't know enough about law enforcement to help them do what they need to do. In the greater Salt Lake area, many community events are held each year. Some, such as the "Night Out against Crime" and the "Safe Kids Fair" are large outdoor events with attractions, food and booths which are designed to educate the public. SWAT cars are displayed, motorcycles are paraded and officers stand ready to answer questions. Stickers and prizes are given out but the take home message according to Hoyal is that "we are here to help." At

these events, important information is also provided concerning the Citizen's Academy, neighborhood watch programs, victim advocacy programs, missing persons and Utah's most wanted, cold case clerical service, the police department's non-emergency number, and other topics further discussed in this report.

Citizen's Academy

To best aid the police and other members of our justice system, an average member of society can join the "Citizen's Academy." This is a training program available to the public, free of charge, hosted by the Utah Department of Public Safety. Interested applicants attend the academy for three hours each week for a total of ten weeks. Hoyal described it as a "mini police academy" with a mix of class-room instruction and hands on demonstrations. Nearly all units give presentations including Narcotics, Gang, Homicide, Major Accident, K-9, Special Victims, etc. Applicants learn about the various firearms used in the force and fire them on a shooting range, experience simulated and real traffic stops, and so forth. They learn what police look for, how to detect a suspicious person or situation, and have a much better understanding of what their local law enforcement does day to day. Graduates come away from the program as much more informed citizens, equipped with new respect for the job and insights allowing them to be extra eyes and ears for the police.

Neighborhood Watch

As citizens understand the important role of their local law enforcement better, they come to realize just how crucial a valid tip or call can be. Neighborhood Watch programs exist to help unite a group of neighbors who are interested in taking a more active role in the protection of their neighborhood. Typically, interested neighbors will first meet to discuss the formation of their new watch group. They can then request for officers to visit their group and train them on becoming a

neighborhood watch. This informs them with how to identify suspicious activity and what to do in those kinds of circumstances. For the most part, the frequency and type of patrol and the structure of the neighborhood watch is up to the members of the group. Many materials, trainings and guidelines on the subject are available to the public. neighborhood watch groups help mostly by informing the police of dangerous or illegal activity in an area, educating the public in how to be more aware of surrounding circumstances, and by preventing harm or crime by dissuading criminals through various means.

Victim Advocates

The police department's need for volunteers is great, but no kind of volunteer is needed more than a victim's advocate. Any concerned citizen who clears a background check can fill this important role. When a person has been victimized in some way (whether by being beaten, mugged, experiencing extreme emotional distress, and so forth) the police will often call upon victim advocates to talk with and assist the victim. The advocate will aid the victim in a variety of ways such as educating the victim on the resources available to him or her. Victim advocates are given training and equipment and are often called out to the crime scene to help. Lieutenant Hoyal made it very clear that the police department is always looking for volunteers to serve in this capacity.

Missing Persons and Most Wanted

Recently in Millcreek, an older gentleman went missing. Lieutenant Hoyal called upon the public to aid in the search. In only a couple of days, over 1800 people came out of our local communities to help. In these cases there is a volunteer venue or location where all interested volunteers first go. Here, they have a background check run and are organized into groups. If anyone wanted to join in the search, they could simply call the Unified Police Department's non-emergency number and ask about where to go. When people are missing, especially children, this influx of manpower can make a crucial difference.

The department's "CART team" (Child Abduction Response Team) have full-time personnel that deal directly with volunteers to help organize and manage these large-scale searches.

In addition to the occasional community search, individuals can also serve in other searches just as urgent. These are the ongoing searches of missing persons and the "most wanted." On milk cartons, websites and posters we often see the faces of those lost to a family or those running from the law. When asked about whether it would be helpful to look for and memorize those faces, Hoyal answered, "Absolutely... That is why they are up, the most wanted and missing children posters, they are up there for the public... we want their help!" Citizens can be the missing ingredient which helps someone unite with their family again or finally be brought to justice. A perfect example is of Derrick Thompson and many other citizens who reported to the police that they sighted Brian David Mitchell after his face appeared on "America's Most Wanted" for the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart in 2002. These reported sightings pointed the authorities in the right direction, and Smart was found.

Cold Case Clerical Service

On occasion, another type of volunteer is needed. Homicide detectives who work "cold" or unsolved cases in Utah often request volunteers to help in a clerical or secretarial manor. There may be a mountain of old reports to search through, files to be organized, or other work which may cost a detective precious time. In cold cases, a second perspective to look over the information may also be extremely beneficial. There are not always openings for volunteers to serve in this capacity, but it never hurts to ask. Any interested individual would need to contact their local precinct to see if there is a detective in need of volunteers to begin the application process.

General Advice

For any volunteer serving the police department in any way, there are some “do’s” and “don’t’s.” For example, the first rule to being any help is, “don’t become a victim.” Adding to the authorities’ work load is obviously counter intuitive if someone wants to make a positive difference in their community.

The first way that individuals can prevent becoming the victim of a crime is to limit the criminal’s opportunity in the first place. Dissuading criminals through a few simple habits is the strongest deterrent to crime. Keeping doors locked, using motion detecting lights, keeping lights on inside a house, and other simple ideas make your home a hard target for “bad guys.” For example, criminals will often go door to door, ringing door bells. They will listen to see if anyone is home. If no one comes to the door, they assume the house is empty. A criminal can then circle the home, looking for an open door. If they are all locked, then a crime has been deterred. This is especially true if the criminal’s activity is illuminated by outdoor lights for others to see.

The same ideas apply to car crimes. If valuables are left on a seat in plain view of a criminal, this can be seen as a reason to break into a car. Keeping car doors locked, valuables left at home or in the trunk, and parking in well-lit areas are all good habits to have.

For volunteers who find themselves meeting new people in new locations often, there are also some important safety tips to remember. “There is safety in numbers” Hoyal says, “There is always safety in numbers.” Fulfilling service opportunities in groups of two or more are much safer than working solo. It is also a good idea to always notice one’s surroundings. The most vulnerable people are those who fail to notice things around them. A good example of something to look for is an exit route. If someone is indoors and finds themselves in a bad situation, they will need an emergency exit. If that person loses track of how they entered a building, it then becomes a safety hazard if they don’t remember how to leave the same way in a hurry.

Another “don’t” is “don’t become involved in a dangerous situation.” If a citizen sees something related to criminal activity happening around him or her, it is the citizen’s job to call the authorities to respond. Police are specially trained to handle these things. Citizens can become part of the problem by getting involved, but they can be part of the solution by noticing the event and calling the police. This is especially important advice to keep in mind for neighborhood watch groups, as they could aggravate the problem by overstepping their role in the overall criminal justice system.

The most important “do” when it comes to volunteer work, whether on a patrol or just in day-to-day life, is to use the police non-emergency number. A crime, suspicious behavior or illegal activity may go un-reported simply because the witness does not want to call 911 with a call which may not be “important enough for 911.” I asked Lieutenant Hoyal about making such a call. I, like many citizens, don’t want to waste an officer’s time if my situation ends up being a “dud” or if I “cry wolf.” Hoyal answered saying, “We would rather get called out for something and find out that it’s nothing... It doesn’t take long for an officer to look at something suspicious.” He later went on to say, “I can’t tell you how many times in my career I have been called on something like a suspicious car which is down the street...and burglars have been arrested, different crimes were going on in those cars and we have been able to catch them just because someone called in...” The police want people like me to call if I see something suspicious. But if I am not quite sure about it, the non-emergency number to police dispatch is a better option than calling 911.