Volunteers have been formally and informally supporting law enforcement efforts for more than a century through posse, auxiliary, and reserve programs. Over the years, the growth of the community policing movement, increased awareness of homeland security threats, and challenging economic circumstances faced by state and local governments have changed the face of law enforcement volunteer programs in many ways.

In 2002, President George W. Bush laid the groundwork for the National Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program through the USA Freedom Corps initiative. With the support of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) launched the VIPS program in May of 2002. This year the program celebrates its 10th year of providing support and resources to state, local, tribal, territorial, and campus law enforcement agencies. The VIPS Program began with 74 registered programs in 29 states. Today there are 2,300 programs representing all 50 states and 20 international locations.

Law enforcement volunteer programs are as varied as the agencies that host them. Programs range in size from one person to thousands. The volunteer’s role is never to replace sworn or civilian employees. Rather, volunteers offer support to allow agencies to provide additional services, maintain positive relationships with the public, free up deputy and staff time for higher level duties, and maximize impact in the community. Volunteers may contribute through community-based roles, such as Neighborhood Watch members or block captains; through administrative roles, such as warrant compliance calls or front desk assistance; or through skilled positions like web design or database creation.

The following agencies represent a small sampling of sheriff’s offices around the country that are providing innovative services to utilize the skills and enthusiasm of volunteers while maintaining critical needs within the department.

Palm Beach County, Florida, Sheriff’s Office – The Sheriff’s Office has 2,600 volunteers working in patrol, support, and administrative functions. Administrative volunteers are placed throughout the agency including the detective bureau, sex offender program, and crime scene. Administrative volunteers have completed 986 Recent Victim Reports and assisted more than 18,000 Palm Beach residents in the Sheriff’s Satellite Offices. The Volunteers Against Scams Team assists victims of identity theft and scams by giving them educational resources to protect them from future victimization. The Special Events Squad assists with Shop with A Cop, Night Out against Crime, and other Sheriff’s Office community events. The Volunteer Emergency Response Team is trained to do missing persons searches and traffic control. Volunteers also perform a variety of patrol functions. Roving Patrol Units perform high-visibility community patrols. The Airport Unit patrols both in uniform and undercover to assist with theft prevention and traffic control. The 25 volunteers in the Mounted Unit use their own horses to patrol wooded areas and represent the Sheriff’s Office in local parades. The Volunteer Marine Unit supports the Sheriff’s Office Marine Patrol and Homeland Security Division by patrolling the intercoastal waterways to observe, report, and aid boaters.

Sacramento County, California, Sheriff’s Department – Sacramento’s Volunteers in Partnership with the Sheriff (V.I.P.S.) are trained to perform a variety of tasks within their community which include: working in a Service Center assisting citizens with community issues and problems, developing crime prevention and safety fairs, helping at DUI checkpoints, and

Celebrating a Decade of Service:
VIPS Continues to Add Value through Law Enforcement Volunteerism

By Jennifer Styles, Project Specialist, Volunteers in Police Service Program, International Association of Chiefs of Police
assisting detectives. Volunteers also help the Sheriff’s Department prepare for and respond to emergencies through the Volunteer Search and Rescue Team, Drowning Accident Rescue Team, and Sacramento County Sheriff’s Amateur Radio Program.

Spokane County, Washington, Sheriff’s Office — The Spokane County Sheriff Community Oriented Policing Effort (SCOPE) program partners law enforcement with citizens and businesses to address issues that detract from the safety and quality of life in Spokane County. SCOPE volunteers staff 18 Neighborhood Outreach Stations located in residential and business areas that serve as clearinghouses for public safety information. They offer a variety of programming including follow-up phone calls to victims, latent fingerprint lifting, disabled parking and abandoned vehicle enforcement, and registered sex offender community notifications. The SCOPE Incident Response Team is trained to assist deputies when streets need to be blocked and traffic needs to be rerouted due to an accident or other emergency. SCOPE has an active mounted unit through which volunteers and horses are certified to perform patrol duties in parks and rural areas. SCOPE volunteers also work with Block Captains to help create and coordinate local Neighborhood Watch programs.

Resources to Start or Enhance a VIPS Program

Every law enforcement volunteer program is different depending on the needs of the agency and the community, but there are several core concepts that all agencies must consider when starting or enhancing a volunteer program: what your volunteers will do; how they will be recruited, vetted, trained, and recognized; who will manage and supervise them; and what policies and procedures will guide the program. With expenses including staff time, work space, screening, supplies, uniforms, and recognition, there are some costs to be considered when planning for a volunteer program.

The Volunteers in Police Service program is here to assist law enforcement agencies in creating or enhancing a volunteer program that will effectively engage volunteers to increase agency efficiency. Resources and tools can be found on the VIPS website at www.policevolunteers.org.

Training

Having a dedicated, well trained volunteer manager is an essential part of maintaining a volunteer program. Over the past 10 years, the VIPS program trained 3,300 law enforcement chiefs, officers, and volunteer managers at training sessions around the country. More than 700 people have registered for the e-learning course, Building Blocks of a Law Enforcement Volunteer Program. This introductory e-learning course covers the foundations of volunteer management and is open to all chiefs and law enforcement volunteer program managers. In August 2012, a new e-learning course, VIPS and Disaster Response, was released. This course provides information about integrating volunteers into a law enforcement agency’s plan for natural disasters, public health crises, and other emergencies. Visit http://www.policevolunteers.org/training_events to register.

Tools

Over the past 10 years, the VIPS program has developed many publications and resources to aid law enforcement volunteer managers. These include a model policy on the use of volunteers, a resource guide for volunteer managers, a collection of videos, and a series of articles on the latest topics and trends in law enforcement volunteer management. Additionally, the VIPS Resource Library has more than 500 sample volunteer applications, handbook, trainings, and other documents from agencies around the country that can help efficiently track and manage volunteers.

Recruitment and Networking

One of the greatest assets of the VIPS Program is the vast collection of knowledge and experience that exists in its national network of law enforcement volunteer program managers. The VIPS to VIPS moderated discussion group allows registered users to post questions and share information about their law enforcement volunteer activities. Volunteer managers can log into their VIPS Directory account or email info@policevolunteers.org to join the discussion group. Through the VIPS Program Directory, volunteer managers can see what other agencies are doing and showcase their programs for prospective volunteers looking to get involved in their communities.

Partnerships

With many law enforcement and government agencies facing limited resources, partnerships become increasingly important. For example, law enforcement agencies can work with fire, public health, and emergency management partners through their state or local Citizen Corps councils to plan for and coordinate volunteer involvement in disaster response. National agencies can be a good resource for training resources. The VIPS Program is currently partnering with the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) on a pilot project to provide no-cost training for volunteers on how to use NamUs and other resources to help law enforcement agencies with missing person and unidentified decedent cases. To further encourage partnerships, the VIPS Program recently announced a new VIPS State Advocate Network program that will increase communication and information sharing between local VIPS programs, promote the mission and goals of law enforcement volunteerism to a wider audience, and expand the network of support for new and growing VIPS programs.

While maintaining a volunteer program requires an investment of time and resources, the return on investment is substantial. With resources from the Volunteers in Police Service Program and a strong national network of law enforcement volunteer managers, the tools are available to help add the value volunteers bring in supporting an agency’s mission.