

## **Eyes in the sky to save lives -- Coalition will make helicopter support available to area law enforcement**

*By Brent Killackey*

Journal Times

Law enforcement agencies conducting searches for missing persons or fleeing felons and fire departments trying to assess fire scenes soon will have easier access to helicopter support.

The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, a newly formed nonprofit group, will have three helicopters available in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, basing one at Kenosha's airport. The coalition evolved out of a helicopter program at the Winthrop Harbor Police Department in Illinois. Since about 2003, Winthrop Harbor has provided regional access to helicopter time that was donated to the department.

The new nonprofit group has taken possession of three OH-58C Bell helicopters donated by the U.S. military, Winthrop Harbor Police Chief Joel Brumlik said. The helicopters - which go by the call-sign Air-One - will be equipped with advanced infrared imaging equipment, ultrabright spotlights, night vision goggles and street-level mapping systems.

There's no charge to police or fire agencies that use the LEAC's services.

All of the personnel involved, including the police officer pilots, are volunteers, Brumlik said. The LEAC will accept tax-deductible donations for maintenance and equipment costs.

The Winthrop Harbor Police Department will remain the coordinating and dispatching agency.

Residents of Racine, Kenosha and Walworth counties might get a glimpse of the police helicopter this coming week. On Wednesday and Thursday, the helicopter will be airborne throughout the region for training exercises.

Law enforcement dispatchers have been warned that people might report low-flying aircraft with a powerful spotlight. The helicopter is equipped with a 40-million-candlepower searchlight, capable of illuminating a target a mile away.

Wednesday's and Thursday's training will involve working with the head of San Diego's police aviation program, according to Cmdr. Dan Bitton of the Winthrop Harbor Police Department. More training exercises will follow in the coming weeks.

Future training will involve use of FLIR, a forward-looking infrared camera system that captures thermal images.

"This FLIR is so sensitive, you can see a mouse running through a field," Brumlik said.

The FLIR system can assist firefighters in tracking hot spots and identifying if it's safe to enter or remain in a building.

The helicopter will be involved in felony-related car chases if such support is requested, but finding

missing people plays a bigger role in the LEAC's mission, Bitton said.

The previous helicopter available from the Withrop Harbor Police Department didn't have FLIR, but its high vantage point proved invaluable in searches, Brumlik said. Three fishermen, close to death, were pulled from Lake Michigan two seasons ago, he said.

"It's going to be a life-saving tool, to be honest with you," Brumlik said. "It has already demonstrated it will save lives. All you have to do is talk to the fishermen."

Brumlick said he expects that the helicopters will save law enforcement time and resources in searches and reduce the risks to police and fire personnel.