

Racine police investigator says new coalition's services 'invaluable'

By Brent Killackey

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The Racine Police Department has previously relied on a police helicopter from the Winthrop Harbor (Ill.) police department.

Last June, Racine requested air support in the search for a 74-year-old Racine man with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Racine Police Sgt. Michael Payne was sent to Batten International Airport to climb aboard the helicopter to assist in the search.

"By the time I got to Batten, red lights and siren, they were already on the ground from Winthrop Harbor," Payne said.

For about the next hour, the helicopter provided a prime vantage point to search difficult terrain and largely inaccessible areas along Lake Michigan.

The tail wash from the helicopter helped jostle around branches and provide better views of the ground, including the discovery of a blanket, which for a moment gave some hope of finding the missing man.

"All of a sudden, I caught a flash of pink," Payne said. The helicopter hovered over the area to provide a vantage point for officers on the ground to find it.

"You would have never found that if you had done a ground search just because the density of the brush and the steep hill," Payne said.

The helicopter provided a vantage point impossible to attain from ground level:

"We got out on the lake and it was like looking down on a swimming pool," he said. "If he had been laying on the bottom, we would have seen him."

Regretably, the man was later found dead under a marina pier.

Had he been within the helicopter search area, Payne said he has no doubt he would have been found - a factor which gives hope for future searches for missing people.

"We would have found him with the 'copter," Payne said.

Payne said the increased availability of helicopters, to be provided by the new Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, will be a good thing for the region.

"It's invaluable," Payne said. "A city our size couldn't probably justify maintaining that, but when you have multiple agencies involved, it's just invaluable for police work."