

# The Journal-Standard

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## Copter newest crime fighter

Former military helicopter could track criminals

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FREEPORT - Stephenson County will have a new crime-fighting tool next spring: a refurbished former military helicopter that will be available to area law enforcement departments searching for criminals on the run, lost children or even terrorists.

The best news about the helicopter, a 1970 Bell OH58C model, is that it's free, thanks to the Department of Homeland Security, The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, the Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm System and volunteer pilots.

Stephenson County is part of ILEAS's Region 2, the largest region in the state, incorporating 17 counties, LEAC is a non-profit organization supported by corporate donations, governmental entities and grants.

"I was able to secure \$125,000 for our helicopter through ILEAS for our avionics unit three weeks ago at a meeting in Springfield," said Stephenson County Sheriff Dave Snyders. "Now we are waiting for a waiver from Homeland Security so we can actually start spending that money."

The area is significant to Homeland Security because it has nuclear plants, the Mississippi River and its bridges, locks and dams, several alternative fuel plants and possibly a biodiesel plant under construction at Mill Race Crossing, Snyders said.

"Homeland Security is very important - part of our daily lives, a large part of our law enforcement commission now. We'll use this for criminal matters whether it will be searching for a criminal, whether it be a burglar or an armed robber," Snyders said.

Such a helicopter, if purchased outright, would cost between \$350,000 to \$400,000 or more, Snyders said.

Two others

There are two other such helicopters in Northwest Illinois, one registered to Byron police and one to Winthrop Harbor police.

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Diana Roemer / The Journal-Standard This 1970 Bell OH58C model helicopter, registered to the Winthrop Harbor Police Department, is what Stephenson County's will look like, according Stephenson County Sheriff Dave Snyders. Sunday, Snyders exhibited the helicopter at the Stephenson County Fair.

"We've actually called (the Winthrop) unit out twice in the past three weeks for lost children," Snyders said.

Chief pilot for the LEAC program, Winnebago County Board member and former U.S. Army helicopter pilot Randy Olson, has volunteered to fly the helicopter when it's needed.

He's already flown the Stephenson County model, which is now in Rockford getting a facelift, because the Department of Defense used them in the past and took very good care of them, Olson said.

"Mechanically they're excellent shape but aesthetically they're ugly," he said. The helicopter will get new radios and black paint and a Stephenson County Sheriff's logo will be painted on its side.

He said such equipment is important for the region because of all the power plants here - there are about 15 in a 100-mile radius of Rockford.

Snyders said he was approached in March about taking one of the helicopters for the Sheriff's Department.

The plan is to store it at the Albertus Airport.

"But that's five to six months down the road and there are some logistical issues to work out before then," Snyders said, adding the pilots and the mechanics are volunteers and the county will receive its fuel at a discount.

"These run on Jet A; we have a source for fuel courtesy of UPS in Rockford," he said.

The helicopter will have a huge spotlight and a FLIR infrared system that will allow enforcement officers to see night movement, Snyders said.

"So don't try to hide. Because we'll find you," Snyders said.

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