

## Police soar with program

Donations help non-profit group give law enforcement eyes in the sky

By Tony Gordon | [Daily Herald Staff](#)

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Police and rescuers in Northern Illinois have a few extra "eyes in the sky" these days, thanks to a federal program that makes some pretty unique military surplus available to local agencies.

And while the Winthrop Harbor-based Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition does not exactly fly on a wing and a prayer, the group does rely heavily on volunteers and donations to stay in the air.

The coalition, formed in 2003 with a privately owned helicopter loaned to police on a limited basis, now has three Vietnam-era Bell helicopters in its fleet and a staff of volunteer pilots and crewmembers.

The brainchild of Winthrop Harbor Police Chief Joel Brumlik, the non-profit corporation is funded by government grants and private donations. It is governed by a board of directors made up of law enforcement and public safety officials.

Brumlik, a veteran of police work in Los Angeles, said his interest in aviation support for police and rescuers was rekindled after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Working with Dan Britton, an officer in his department and a former pilot for the then-defunct state police helicopter program, Brumlik developed training protocols and manuals for police officers looking to take to the sky.

While still using the borrowed helicopter, Brumlik said he had an epiphany when he got a call from Coast Guard personnel in spring 2003 trying to locate three men whose boat had capsized in Lake Michigan.

Britton flew over the water, located the men hanging onto their overturned boat and led the rescuers to them with his radio.

"One of the men rescued called Dan his 'angel in the sky,' and I really believed they would have died had we not found them," Brumlik said. "It was then I decided we had to get serious and make this thing bigger."

LEAC was formed as a corporation, he said, because the task of maintaining an air support system is too large for one department.

Working with the Illinois Law Enforcement Support Organization, the group received its first surplus Bell OH-58C Kiowa helicopter from the Department of Homeland Security in November 2006, and two more came into the fold this year.



The donations are part of a nationwide Homeland Security program state officials say brought \$5.1 million in surplus federal material into Illinois to beef up 16 police departments.

The Kiowa is a single-engine observation helicopter typically crewed by a pilot and a flight officer. It has a maximum speed of 120 mph and a range of 345 miles.

The government helicopters were stripped, repainted and fitted with a wide array of police equipment including radios, 40 million candlepower searchlights and infrared cameras that track thermal images.

Police agencies from Wisconsin and Illinois call for the birds, based at airports in Kenosha and Rockford, on the average of five or six times a month, Brumlik said. Missions range from felonies in progress to search and rescue.

Any police department wanting helicopter assistance simply calls a Winthrop Harbor dispatcher to request a flight, Brumlik said. A ship is in the air without charge to the requesting department.

All crews are made up of police officers who donate their time for missions and training, he said. Maintenance and other costs are covered by grants and donations from businesses, government and individuals.

For example, Hospital Corporation of American donated \$25,000 to the cause, and companies and individuals throughout the state have given \$1,000 to \$5,000, according to Sally Nyhan, a fundraiser working with the group.

The Winnebago County Board committed to donating \$100,000 a year for the next five years, Brumlik said. He has asked the Lake County Board consider donating as well.

"I hope we can do something because I really believe it is a worthwhile program," Lake County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt said.

A certified helicopter mechanic provides maintenance on the machines at "a deeply discounted rate," Brumlik said. United Parcel Service sells them jet fuel sharply below the average price.

"I have been really gratified by the way people have been willing to come in and support us in so many different ways," he said. "With the ground we can cover quickly to enhance responses to so many different situations, it goes way beyond any village or department and really is a way to enhance our entire region."

