

Air One fights crime from the sky — at no charge

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By SUSAN W. MURRAY *The Independent*

Most major metropolitan police departments have helicopter units, including Los Angeles with 26 police choppers.

Chicago and the state of Illinois are exceptions. To fill that gap in the crime-fighting arsenal, Air One has been providing helicopter support to law enforcement in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin since 2003.

Woodstock resident Michael Bitton, a Winthrop Harbor police officer and Director of Operations for Air One, spoke to more than two dozen Woodstock residents at the Nov. 12 Coffee with the Chief.

Air One came about when a donation gave flight to an idea. A wealthy man offered the Winthrop Harbor Police Department the use of his own \$5 million twin-engine helicopter. Bitton's brother, Dan, a pilot for the defunct state police helicopter unit and a Winthrop Harbor police officer, conferred with his police chief, Joel Brumlik. The two recognized the value and expense of airborne support. They created a unique model: a police helicopter unit staffed by volunteers, supported by charitable donations and available to local law enforcement at no cost. The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, or LEAC, is the registered not-for-profit charitable organization that operates Air One.

Four years later, eight very experienced pilots fly the three helicopters in the unit, four people provide ground support and 30 sworn police officers and sheriff's deputies work as tactical flight officers. All are volunteers, available for missions when they are not working their regular jobs. The pilots and tactical flight officers train every week. Air One also trains local law enforcement officers in how to call for assistance and how to work with the helicopter pilots.

"There isn't a law enforcement officer in the land who doesn't want to go out and help people," said Bitton. Local law enforcement can call Air One's 24-hour dispatch service for assistance in looking for missing persons, felonies in progress, catching a fleeing suspect, counter-terrorism or drug interdiction. Air One also assists firefighters by detecting hot sections of a burning building. When working with law enforcement, the goal is to increase officer safety by circling and confining suspects to a specific area.

Air One has acquired three 1970s-vintage Army helicopters for its fleet, refurbishing each one at a cost of \$250,000. Additionally, each helicopter is equipped with night-vision technology at a cost of \$220,000. *"From 2,000 feet, I can see a field mouse,"* said Bitton. The \$40,000

searchlight on the helicopter's rear can "*burn through three inches of blacktop*" if turned on while the chopper is on the ground, Bitton said.

Bitton brought along a training video that showed the difference between trying to find two hikers in darkness or with night-vision equipment. On one side of the screen, only the occasional blink of the hikers' flashlights were visible; on the other side, night vision revealed the terrain and clear outlines of the two hikers.

Bitton also played a video showing the view from Air One as its officers assisted police in apprehending two subjects. The helicopter's thermal imaging camera showed the white forms of the suspects, police officers and the police dog. While the pilot steered the helicopter, the tactical air officer described the suspects' locations and movements via radio to the officers on the ground. Both suspects were apprehended in a matter of minutes. "*Fascinating*" and "*very interesting*," remarked residents after the video.

Impressed with the volunteer aspect of Air One, members of the audience asked several questions about its funding. LEAC must raise \$850,000 each year to cover the cost of fuel, supplies and maintenance, Bitton said. The board of directors, of which Bitton is a member, cobbles together funds from county and local governments, Crime Stoppers, the Department of Homeland Security, corporate donations and grass roots fundraising. Currently, neither the city of Woodstock nor McHenry County earmark money in their budgets for Air One. The shoestring budget means that Air One cannot fulfill every request for assistance. "*We've turned down more missions than we can take*," said Bitton.

Interested residents can learn more about Air One by visiting its Web site at www.airsupport.org.

Woodstock High School resource officer and Police Officer of the Year Josh Fourdyce will speak at the next Coffee with the Chief at 7 p.m., Monday, Dec. 10, in the training room of the police department on Lake Avenue.

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