

## Police use free copter service



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Milwaukee police made use of a Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition helicopter to monitor this year's Juneteenth Day celebration.

By [Ryan Haggerty](#) of the *Journal Sentinel*

Posted: Jun. 28, 2009

Most area law enforcement agencies would love to have a helicopter.

Almost none can afford one, especially given today's economic climate.

But for law enforcement agencies throughout northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, the aid of a helicopter is a phone call away.

And best of all, the chopper is free.

The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, an all-volunteer nonprofit based in Winthrop Harbor, Ill., operates four helicopters available at no cost for everything from assisting in search-and-rescue missions to tracking vehicle pursuits.

One of the organization's helicopters helped Milwaukee police monitor the recent Juneteenth festival and returned to the city the next day, June 20, to participate in a block-party fund-raiser for two officers who were shot earlier this month.

Aside from some government grants, the program relies on donations to cover maintenance and operational costs, which are substantial. Each hour flown by one of the organization's three Bell OH-58C helicopters costs more than \$700, said Mike Bitton, the nonprofit's director of operations.

Although the economy has made it more difficult to gather donations, the organization has attracted considerable attention from law enforcement agencies outside the region, Bitton said.

This model makes this available at no charge to every big and small police and fire and rescue agency around, so it's a big value." . . . "We get calls from across the country looking at the model we have here," he said. "It's born of the observation that very, very few organizations can afford to operate an air wing.

All staff members are volunteers, including more than 50 law enforcement officers from Illinois and Wisconsin who donate their off-duty time to serve as pilots, ground support workers and tactical flight officers, Bitton said.

The four helicopters are about 30 years old and were obtained from the military for free through a federal surplus program, Bitton said. The aircraft are flyable when delivered but have antiquated technology and equipment, he said.

Each chopper undergoes a roughly \$500,000 refurbishment that includes the installation of new radios, a forward looking infrared system that helps officers see through smoke and fog, street-level mapping equipment that costs about \$90,000 and searchlights that cost about \$40,000, Bitton said.

Two of the helicopters are stationed at Kenosha Regional Airport. The other two are based in Rockford, Ill.

Milwaukee police Sgt. Al Riestra, who serves as a tactical flight officer and is one of two Milwaukee officers who volunteer with the organization, was aboard the helicopter that flew from Kenosha to Milwaukee on June 19 and 20.

At a large gathering such as the Juneteenth festival, the helicopter crew monitors the crowd as people disperse and helps direct officers to potential trouble spots, Riestra said.

"Sometimes, all it takes is for us to fly over that crowd, and the crowd disperses," he said.

Helicopter crews also have supported officers carrying out routine police work in Milwaukee, such as using the aircraft's spotlight to illuminate traffic stops while an officer waits for backup, Riestra said.

Officers have told Riestra that they appreciate the air support.

they knew we were there and that we had their back," he said. . . . "As soon as we would shine our light

To learn more about the organization, or make a donation, go to [www.airsupport.org](http://www.airsupport.org).