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LEAC offers inside look at its mission, capabilities

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By Marissa Alter

WINNEBAGO COUNTY (WREX) - In the five years since the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition's creation, police and fire agencies throughout Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin have called on the former military choppers more and more to help out in field operations.



Tonight community leaders got a close look at how those helicopters work and what LEAC's role has become, and 13 News came along for the ride.

Three LEAC helicopters are based at RFD. Each has spotlights bright enough to illuminate a football field, a 360-degree camera, and infrared equipment for night vision.



"We started out doing mostly law enforcement, and what's happened over the last four or five years is we're moving more towards search and rescue. We're doing more with the fire departments. We're doing more looking for missing persons."

The choppers were called out to survey flooding in 2008 and the train derailment scene last year. LEAC provided air support for Chicago police during the last presidential election, and pilots were also key in the arrest of Omarrian Jones.



"I think the last time we used them was a subject with a gun call late night in a cemetery," says Rockford Deputy Police Chief Theo Glover. "They illuminated the cemetery. Shortly after they flew over the cemetery, the subject gave himself up. So situations such as that--they're just an amazing tool for us to use."

Belvidere's called on LEAC's services three times in the last few years. The most recent, after a 911 call about two kayakers going over the dam.

"We found the kayakers down stream. They indeed were safe and sound," says Belvidere Police Chief Jan Noble. "But had we not had the services of LEAC, it would've been hundreds of more hours on the ground, in boats, trying to find individuals we thought had drowned."

Funding for LEAC is tight. The government donates the equipment, but LEAC relies on grants and donations to operate. Winnebago County has had the largest buy-in, \$300,000 over the past few years.

"No one department can afford to own and operate a helicopter, but jointly all of us sharing the resources, it's a win-win for communities," Noble.

13 News got a closer look at LEAC's capabilities with a ride over Winnebago County. From the air, we saw the Lowes Distribution Center, Meridian Road, and even got a different view of our home base.

LEAC is all volunteer, so response times run one hour to 90 minutes.

"What LEAC really wants to do to increase service is to be able to have funding enough so that we can station personnel at the airport during high peak times for violence and crime, and then have a quick response time," Olson says.



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