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## Law enforcement displays air power

By Ginny Skweres  
Zion-Benton News Staff

The Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition offers Air One Search and Rescue to law enforcement agencies in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. It has sophisticated helicopters flown and operated by volunteers from a number of agencies in the same area. It is a non-profit organization and there is no charge to agencies who request help.

A recent presentation for Lake County Board members at the Waukegan Regional Airport impressed many with the coalition's capability and man power. The two helicopters at the airport are titled to the Winthrop Harbor Police and included a Bell OH 58C 'Kiowa' helicopter and a Bell UH-1V 'Huey.' Helicopters are garaged in Kenosha and Rockford. The crew can take off in as little as an hour after receiving a request and the helicopters fly at about 120 mph.

The Kiowa, the smaller of the two helicopters, is equipped with a search light and a FLIR thermal imaging unit. The search light can not only turn night into day, but can also be used with night vision goggles that make the searchlight 'invisible' to the naked eye.

The thermal imaging unit has infra red cameras with zoom lenses and a mapping system. The heat from a living person can be seen on the camera, which is immensely helpful when searching for a missing person. It was recently used in the capture of one of two men in Pleasant Prairie, Wis. It can be used, for example, to locate a missing child or find someone who is out on the lake.

"We're probably out a couple of times a week on average," Winthrop Harbor Police Chief Joe Brumlik said. Chief Brumlik is the president of LEAC which was founded by and is coordinated

by the Winthrop Harbor Police Department. They provide the 24-hour dispatch service. "If there's enough information to warrant a search and there is some belief of success, we take critical action when there's a risk of loss of life," he said.

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LEAC is served by volunteers, including helicopter pilots, tactical flight officers and ground crew members. The TFOs operate the lights and cameras and handle radio communication between the pilot and the community. The ground support officers help with landings and more. LEAC members include firefighter/paramedics as well as police officers.

The Huey helicopter is especially useful in rescue situations since it has more room inside. It can be used to reach areas where there is no street access and help the Coast Guard do search and rescue and bring individuals to shore.

The helicopters can also be used to help fight fires with water drops and protect firefighters with the FLIR unit that can 'see' through dense smoke. That timely information could keep firefighters off an unstable roof top or make some other deadly decision without complete information.

The Huey is sometimes sent to back up a SWAT team where injuries are a possibility, one TFO said. Air One was used for rescue after Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and was on stand-by for aiding Haiti but a landing site could not be found, according to Tactical Flight Officer Lt. Jeff Varga of the St. Francis Police Department in Wisconsin.

Tactical Flight Officer Matt Prochaska said AIR One is another tool for law enforcement. "It gives me an opportunity to do different things, meet people from different departments and make contacts who are good resources. They have different skills and it's a good learning experience," he said. "It gives you a little pride to be involved in this."

While LEAC is made up of volunteers it does need funding to operate. Funding comes from sources such as municipalities, grants and private donations, including corporate donations.

The Winthrop Harbor helicopters were donated by the Department of Defense and were then refurbished and equipment was added.

LEAC offers its services to law enforcement free of charge and the real need is funding for the operation of the program, including fuel.

"We've got to have enough funding to have crews in place at busy times. That would improve response time and success," Brumlik said. "We have the technology and the equipment.

"We look for operational funding. If every municipality could contribute some funding it would be a big help. Everybody's got to chip in or else we can't fly," Brumlik said. "If looked at the right way it could save money."

Lake County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt said LEAC is good for the county. "I know that when we have search and rescue, these guys are out there looking for people, missing children," she said. "What we use them for a lot is flooding. They help us do assessments that help us file for federal grants - FEMA fund money." The pictures taken from a helicopter are used to verify flood damage. In return, Lake County has made donations for the fuel used, she said.

Schmidt told Brumlik there was no county money available for a donation but said perhaps their grant writers could help with something. She and Brumlik tossed around the idea of seeking a grant by working with other counties.

LEAC is a unique organization and was honored by the International Chiefs of Police Association in 2008. It won an award from the World Police Institute for the innovative program that is shared by so many agencies.