

Despite Budget Cuts that caused layoffs in the jail and patrol staff at the beginning of summer, Columbia County is still receiving quality services from its Sheriff's Office, thanks to an empowered staff, increased outside funding and strong volunteer services.



"In many ways, we are getting more done with less, thanks to volunteers and creative staff members and thanks to a high level of outside funding, which is made up of grants, fees and agreements with outside entities," says Sheriff Jeff Dickerson.

This summer, because of a \$700,000 budget reduction, the Sheriff's Office lost four Corrections Division positions and one Enforcement Division position. The layoffs would have been worse, except for a high level of outside revenue developed in this budget year. Additionally, a program featuring a call-triage system instituted last fall and a cadre of newly cross-trained deputies in both divisions, has absorbed the budget cuts with very little visible effect to the overall public safety mission

Added to the creative problem-solving that has led to improvement in service delivery county-wide, the Sheriff's Office has a high percentage of revenue coming in from outside resources in the form of grants, fees, and outside entity agreements totaling over \$3.1 million in the current budget year.

"The revenue from outside sources is significant," says Undersheriff Andy Moyer. "With the county budget stressed to the point that only about \$2.6 million is dedicated to the Sheriff's Office, the outside revenue we bring in makes up over half of the operating costs of the entire Sheriff's Office." In the past four years, the Sheriff's Office has been buttressed by more than

the \$12 million in outside resources while the county has provided roughly the same amount over that same period of time. "Without that outside funding from various sources, the Sheriff's Office mission would be severely crippled," Moyer said.

The Sheriff's Office also relies on volunteers to help fill gaps in service levels. Volunteers serve in all three divisions of the sheriff's office, providing excellent services to the community at little extra cost to the public. Reserve deputies help patrol in Columbia County both on the river and on the roadways. About 40 fully active Search and Rescue volunteers are available and train regularly to respond anywhere in or out of Columbia County to search for missing people or to find important evidence in a crime. Add to that number an additional 10 volunteers who help with Sheriff's office programs, and there are well over 50 volunteers who are active members of the Sheriff's volunteer program.

"We have the highest number ever of trained and certified volunteer Search and Rescue members," says Volunteer Search and Rescue coordinator Ron Hermo. These Search and rescue volunteers contribute thousands of hours each year to community service.

Lieutenant Dustin Hald oversees the Sheriff's Reserve Deputy program, and is currently in the background investigation stage on adding three additional reserve deputies to the four very active reserves serving in the Enforcement Division. Reserve deputies augment and expand the capabilities of the Sheriff's Office.

"Our Reserve Deputies average close to 250 hours every month -- thousands of hours per year," says Lieutenant Hald. "Our reserves are an important part of our volunteer program. Last year, all Sheriff's office volunteers put in 6,708 total hours, and this year, they are on pace to put in well over 8,000 hours of volunteer, community service."

"Our volunteer programs are the highlight of an attitude that is growing among our staff," says Sheriff Dickerson. "And that attitude is one of a can-do nature. We have a team here that is growing together to embrace our mission and find creative ways to solve problems in the myriad ways they present themselves in the three Divisions of the Sheriff's Office: Enforcement, Corrections and Support Services."

Part of that creativity is the call-triage system that has enabled deputies to have more time to investigate serious crimes without having any dropped calls. In times past, deputies going from call to call would not be able to keep track of them all as they stacked up each day. The new system allows deputies to put many non-emergency calls on hold until someone (a deputy, supervisor, or the sheriff) can get to the call for follow up at a later time.

As a result, some calls are being handled with some delay, but every call is being answered. A higher percentage of emergencies are getting a quicker response and a higher percentage of criminal investigations are being completed throughout the county.

"These are difficult economic times for many sheriff's offices around our state and nation," the sheriff says. "By empowering employees to be creative in their jobs, and by building bridges to volunteers and outside resources, we continue to provide the best service possible with the

resources we have in Columbia County."