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Gold Canyon volunteers bolster police presence

CHRISTIAN RICHARDSON, TRIBUNE
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ON PATROL: Citizens on Patrol volunteers Chet Haines and Bob Biava, left, check their car before patrolling Gold Canyon on Thursday. The patrol program has been instituted by the Pinal County Sheriff's Office to increase the police presence.

Leigh Shelle Robertus, Tribune

Time couldn't take the cop out of 69-year-old Chet Haines. He says it's in his blood. The man with glasses and thinning hair combed to the side once patrolled the streets of East Hanover, N.J.

But now he cruises the winding roads of Gold Canyon with 64-year-old Bob Biava, a retired businessman who, with gray hair combed back, stands over 6 feet tall — inches above Haines.

The men — COP 3 and COP 26, respectively — are

members of Citizens on Patrol, a volunteer branch of the Pinal County Sheriff's Office. They carry no weapons and patrol in a revamped Ford Taurus. The two men are among 35 local residents who volunteer for the program.

Residents of Gold Canyon — an unincorporated and upper-class community known for its golf courses and stunning views — had called for greater police presence. Last year, many of the crimes reported locally included vehicle break-ins, construction site thefts, complaints of aggressive door-to-door salespeople and a rash of mail theft, says sheriff's Chief Deputy Jerald Monahan.

But, the Pinal County Sheriff's Office found itself struggling to cover the county's 5,600 square miles. So several Gold Canyon residents went through training and now patrol their community, providing a police presence to a community that otherwise might not see a deputy for days, Monahan says.

"We want a career criminal to see what appears to be law enforcement presence," he says.

The Citizens on Patrol program began last fall and is on the verge of expanding to the areas of SaddleBrooke and Johnson Ranch as soon as the sheriff's office finds volunteers for those areas, Monahan says.

On this overcast March afternoon, Biava sits behind the wheel with Haines riding "shotgun" as they begin a twohour tour of the town that is lined with stucco homes nestled against the Superstition Mountains.

It's a quiet, intimate community with a few thousand residents. As the pair drive through town, a woman waves from her front yard, a man walks along the side of the road.

Biava and Haines often ride together. The two live in Mountain Brook Village, a subdivision with 1,650 homes for people 55 and older. They met 32 years ago when they were on a cruise with their wives and realized that they were both from New Jersey.

The volunteers are the eyes and ears of the sheriff's office. They are instructed to not verbally or physically confront people; however, they report anything suspicious to dispatchers.

Biava travels toward Lost Goldmine Trail while a radio dispatcher's voice clicks in and out over the scanner. Depending on how far away the nearest deputy is, dispatchers in an emergency situation may send a deputy to help, or ask Apache Junction police to respond.

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"When you're on patrol you want to be systematically unsystematic," Haines says. "You never want to follow the same route twice."

Haines says volunteers look for anything out of the ordinary. If they spot an open garage door, they let the homeowner know. At night, they patrol business parking lots.

"We want to develop community relationships," he says. "We want the people to know that we're here, and we're here to help them."

Biava drives through the Bashas' grocery store parking lot, looking for people who seem out of place — dressed shabbily or walking diagonally in the parking lot, scoping out cars.

The men say they haven't seen much "action" since they began in October. But they recall instances where they've caught sight of unusual activity: the man they spotted urinating on the roadway, and the woman who drove into a pack of javelinas, killing all three.

The volunteers say they also have witnessed thefts and reported them to dispatchers. Once, a driver was seen stealing a coin machine from a local carwash. Deputies arrived too late.

The volunteers are equipped with a radar gun to gauge speeders, but by law, can't issue traffic tickets. When noting speeding or other driving violations, they write down the offender's license plate number.

Become a volunteer

Any Gold Canyon resident interested in becoming a Citizens on Patrol volunteer should contact Pinal County Sheriff's Cpl. Stormee Wallace at (520) 866-5112 or

stormee.wallace@co.pinal.az.us.

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