



Volunteers fill gaps for Ariz. police

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Enlarge By David Wallace, The Arizona Republic, for USA TODAY

Bob Meinecke, 68, of Gold Canyon, Ariz., a volunteer in the Citizens on Patrol (COPS) program with the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, talks to an employee of the Superstition Mountain Golf and Country Club about activity on the exclusive grounds. The COPS program is providing eyes and ears for the Pinal County Sheriff's Office.

play catch-up now."

One response is Citizens on Patrol — 31 volunteers here in Gold Canyon. The members, mostly retirees, wear distinctive blue golf shirts and drive a cast-off patrol car in this quiet, wealthy community of 22,000.

Half of Gold Canyon's deputies recently were transferred 19 miles south to serve booming new working-class communities totaling 80,000 people, where officers "keep busy with family fights, thefts, burglaries, traffic offenses, carrying concealed weapons, assaults," Brown says. "With all the tremendous growth, we just wouldn't be able to operate without the volunteers."

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Lacking a siren, weapons, badges or arrest powers, the volunteers are ordered to shun confrontations. They radio suspicious goings to a dispatcher, who summons deputies. They sometimes wield a radar gun to nail speeders, but offenders get mailed warnings, not tickets.

Maintaining an apparent police presence with unarmed volunteers deters crime, says Lionel Ruiz, chairman of the Pinal County Board of Supervisors. "What do you do when you see a police car on the highway, even when you're going at a proper speed? You step on the brake."

Reported crime down 50%

Brown credits Citizens on Patrol with slashing reported crime 50% since September. Vasquez says he'll expand the concept to two larger communities. "It's added visibility for us, it's extra eyes and ears," he says. "And as people who live in these neighborhoods, they're in the best position to know what doesn't belong there."

Half of Arizona's law enforcement agencies have turned to citizen patrols, says Arthur Femister, president of the California-based National Association Citizens on Patrol. It started in New York City in 1950 and has spurred recently to 100,000 volunteers in 3,000 units nationwide, he says.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were a spur in recruiting volunteers, Femister says. Sun Belt growth like Arizona's is another big factor. California, Florida and Texas have the most volunteer units, he says.

Starting a two-hour shift here, Rick Reynolds climbs into the volunteer program's Ford Taurus with partner Bob Meinecke. Reynolds radios their identification numbers to the dispatcher 25 miles south in the county seat of Florence.

By [Martin Kasindorf](#), USA TODAY

GOLD CANYON, Ariz. — In the fastest-growing county in the fastest-growing state, volunteers are pitching in to patrol streets as the surging population outstrips police budgets.

Pinal County, a swath of Arizona desert between Tucson and Phoenix roughly the size of Connecticut, has grown 51% since 2000 to a population of 271,059, according to the latest Census reports. Phoenix's sprawl reached Pinal County five years ago and overwhelmed local officials. Sheriff Chris Vasquez says his 250 deputies are 175 short of the manpower he needs.


"We didn't have the infrastructure — roads, law enforcement and fire," says Lt. Doug Brown, commander of the Gold Canyon substation 35 miles east of Phoenix. "It outgrew us too quick. Poor planning, I guess you would say. We're trying to

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"Citizens on Patrol 38 and 36. We are 10-7 out here at Gold Canyon," Reynolds says in police code.

The dispatcher politely tells Reynolds that the correct code for "in service" is 10-8. She reminds him that 10-7 means "out of service."

"I'm sorry. 10-8," he says.

It's hard to blame Reynolds, 48, for the lapse in lingo. Before he retired as a General Motors test driver in Fenton, Mich., and moved here in November, "I never had any thought about being in any kind of police work," he says. Reynolds read about the need for volunteers and signed up.

Volunteers receive eight hours of classroom training and an evasive-driving course. Reynolds says he enjoys patrolling so much that he'd like to apply to be a deputy. "Talking my wife into it is another thing," he says.

The Taurus has clocked more than 100,000 miles and is no longer safe at high speeds, Vasquez says. The volunteers who have shared the car since the program started in September may get a second car when their numbers reach a soon-expected 65, Brown says.

"I enjoy living in a very safe community," says Meinecke, 68, a retired businessman who moved here from Scottsdale, Ariz., 12 years ago.

'Boring is good'

Meinecke heads the car out of the station. The partners slowly troll gleaming shopping centers and residential neighborhoods at the foot of the Superstition Mountains.

A big local crime problem is car break-ins to steal stereos, Brown says. Reynolds and Meinecke check parked cars for smashed windows. They check vacant stores that copper thieves might target. Waved into a gated development of multimillion-dollar homes, they look for signs of burglary.

The action that volunteers have seen here is modest. Brown credits them with getting information from witnesses that led to a man's arrest for stealing coin machines from a car wash.

Some other past reports: A woman ran over three javelinas and volunteers had to tote the dying piglike animals off the highway. A motorcyclist was urinating alongside the road. A woman reported that a man was stealing saguaro cactuses in the desert, an offense carrying a \$10,000 fine.

On a recent 90-degree day, the streets are peaceful. "In this job, boring is good," Meinecke says. "It means you're making an impact."

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