

Galesburg "Community Security Unit" established



Lt. David Christensen, a 20-year veteran of the Galesburg Police Department, is in charge of the new Community Security Unit.

by Caroline Porter

On the day of September 11th, 2001, Galesburg Police chief John Schlaf issued an order that all personnel stand by on alert for events that might occur locally, according to Lt. David Christensen, in charge of the newly organized Community Security Unit. "An actual attack seems remote," said the memo, "but none of us can assume nothing will happen here."

What happened here was only a minor panic about the availability of gas, and residents lined the streets near stations to fill up. The police were on hand to control traffic and tempers, as prices at one station rose dramatically. Christensen says that no other incidents occurred. Other concerns of the police were citizens hoarding food or forming lines at the banks for withdrawals. The police were available for crowd control.

There have been no incidents of violence or protests against the war on terrorism. As for reprisals against people appearing to be from the Middle East, Christensen recalls one name-calling incident and nothing since. He says this "speaks well of Galesburg."

There are other reasons for local law enforcement to be concerned, however. It's not news to Galesburg citizens that it is a railroad center and that "sensitive" loads go through the railroad yards. Christensen declined to comment on the content of the loads, but one can speculate that there are a number of hazardous materials that sit in our yards in railroad cars and travel through the community.

During the weeks following the attack and the anthrax scare, the department was a good source of information. "We dispelled rumors and answered a lot of calls, which was not anticipated," said Christensen. The anthrax scare stopped about as suddenly as it started, he said, and up until May 12, of 1748 samples, there were no positive tests in Illinois. Locally, there were incidents at Maytag Refrigeration and Butler Manufacturing, but they were innocent substances. In May, only 50 samples were tested in the State.

But what can happen now? Although there is no evidence of any plans, there is a theory that a terrorist attack on Middle America — far from the coasts and big cities — would shake to the core America's confidence and sense of security.

The newly formed Community Security Unit serves not only as a conduit of information about terrorist activities, but directs local activities and is an umbrella for organizations such as Crimestoppers, Neighborhood Watch and Fleet Watch. Fleet Watch issues bulletins to companies who have large fleets of vehicles, such as Illinois Power, Burlington Northern-Santa Fe, government vehicles, the post office.

Some additional security measures are already in place. Patrols have been intensified at the railroad yards and the water treatment plant.

Security has been tightened at the Public Safety Building itself, in that some individual offices within the police department are now locked at all times. The police and sheriff's departments, as a whole, have always been locked. Law enforcement officials communicate more frequently with the county health department, the hospitals, fire department. The health department must be concerned with bioterrorism, through communicable diseases or the water system. Plans for transportation and local distribution of a pharmaceutical package to be used for such events are in place. Christensen said that Knox County has been pro-active in formulating plans for dealing with hazardous materials. He said there has been good cooperation between all groups.

Christensen emphasized the need for citizens to be alert and just use good sense. "Last fall two Middle Easterners appeared at the municipal airport and dropped off a rented car," he related. "They said they were supposed to go to Chicago, but ended up in Galesburg. Airport employees reported the incident, the men were checked out and everything was okay."

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A usual activity of the department is to monitor the activities of people such as former militiaman Dan Shoemaker, but Christensen emphasizes that all citizens need to be aware of such individuals and groups. He added that the department and individuals should be aware of potential problems of infrastructure protection, such as computer viruses.

On a larger scale, Christensen communicates with the Office of Domestic Preparedness, Illinois Emergency Management Agency, the military and the FBI. Once a month he and other department representatives attend meetings at the Rock Island Arsenal run by General McManus, arsenal director. There they meet with area law enforcement, FBI and Federal prosecutors to receive and discuss potential terrorist activities in the area. Christensen has a huge notebook of information provided by the military. He said there is a great deal of information available on various websites which are also accessible to the public, such as those for the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, FBI, Office of Domestic Preparedness.

Christensen said, "I have already received two e-mail bulletins today from the Office of Domestic Preparedness (national Homeland Security), with general information on international terrorism. They color code warning levels of certain countries, such as India, which is high. I've received 10 pages of warnings."

This May 6th, there was a Homeland Security meeting in Galesburg for area fire, police and emergency personnel at Knox College, attended by about 70 people. Presenters were from the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute, and attendees participated in a number of different crises scenarios.

Law enforcement officials here are working to provide auto vehicle locators (AVL) in all squad cars for the purpose of 911 calls. By July, they will have a computer-aided dispatch system, where a computer shows a digital map of the whole county, shows the origin of the 911 call, the location of squad cars and if necessary, cars can be directed to the call. Question: How many 911 calls are

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there in a month in Knox County? (Answer follows.)

Christensen says that dissemination of information to the public is becoming an increasingly important role for the department. With that in mind, they have begun First Tuesday programs, clearly on the first Tuesday of the month, 6:30 pm at the Public Safety building. The second meeting on June 4 is about the problems of methamphetamine, presented by Lt. David Clague. The First Tuesday website offers information about upcoming issues.

Law enforcement and citizen awareness of individuals and group activity in the area was validated this year when a man from Peoria with ties to bin Laden was arrested.

Christensen repeated, "Citizens should always be on alert and notify us."