

The County Press

Deputies get training on securing site, signals for helicopter landings

By SUSAN YOUNGER
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LAPEER -- Ground control to deputy Bill-- landings will be safer for police chopper pilots following special training at the Lapeer County Sheriff's Department squad room Wednesday.

Oakland County Sheriff's Department Deputy Bill Christensen, Lapeer County Sheriff's volunteer pilot deputy Bill Henson, Sr. and former volunteer pilot deputy Jim Ligon schooled a crowded room of Lapeer County Sheriff's Department deputies on helicopter signals and how to make the landing zone safer for the pilot, victims, rescue workers and observers in the area.

Private pilot Christensen, and previously Ligon, make their helicopters available to the Lapeer County Sheriff's Department as a public service. Ligon, who recently sold his chopper, served the county for over six years, said Lapeer County Sheriff Ron Kalanquin.

The department also calls on the Oakland County Sheriff's Aviation Unit which was started in June 2001. The first helicopter purchased, named Air One, was operational for less than a month when the first capture with the help of the helicopter occurred. Since then, the unit has assisted several area departments with everything from larceny to aggravated rape, said Ligon.

"We will utilize Oakland County more frequently because of a partnership we have with Sheriff (Michael) Bouchard," Kalanquin said. "Helicopters are used for a number of applications such as a fugitive fleeing, incidents where inmates have escaped from jail, or a missing child. Another use is finding someone with Alzheimer's who may have wandered away from a caregiver."

One helicopter in the air can cover as much territory as 12 officers in patrol cars on the ground. Special equipment on Oakland County's helicopters includes forward-looking infrared units that can detect heat sources in total darkness, and a 30-million watt candle power remote spotlight called night "Sun." It has the ability to illuminate a pitch-dark area as if it was high noon on a summer day, said Ligon.

One deputy is in charge at a landing zone and issues the helicopter signals; all who took the training are qualified, said Kalanquin. Inclement weather ruined plans to land helicopters in a field at the sheriff's department Wednesday and conduct live training, but deputies received an hour-long presentation and took a test.

The instruction is being certified and may soon be used by statewide by pilots, added Kalanquin.

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