During a cold winter, GPD officers take steps to serve their community

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun
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The *Sun* rides along with Officer Hughte on his Dec. 11 patrol

Gallup Police Department Officers continued their open field searches across the city on Dec. 11, in an effort to prevent exposure deaths during the winter months. Recent cold weather has gripped the community, and the recent death of a Window Rock man on the east side of Gallup has been considered exposure related.

Community service aide officers from the police department patrol arroyos, fields, hills, back areas of businesses, rocky purchases and overnight camps that spring up across the city. The black and white vans of the CSAs are a familiar sight on city streets.

GPD Capt. Marinda Spencer said camps erected by vagrants usually consist of tents and makeshift shelters.

“Our community service aides go into those areas and check on those folks,” Spencer said. “We had the first reported death of the winter season and we don’t know for sure if it was an exposure death. We are awaiting the autopsy report to determine death.”

The purpose of protective custody is to provide a safe place for individuals that can’t care for themselves due to being impaired. In the Gallup area, most impaired individuals are high on alcohol.

“Maybe their intoxication level is putting them in danger,” Spencer said. “Or people might call in and report individuals. Sometimes it’s voluntary and individuals will wave down our community service aide vans.”

The police department has a total of 67 officers. Eight of these positions are for CSAs. Seven of the positions are currently filled.

GPD Chief Phillip Hart said that the dedication of CSAs patrolling nightly during winter months in an effort to save lives should not be overlooked.

“Community service aide officers are out patrolling seven days a week. We recently purchased a UTV that is specially outfitted with 360-degree floodlights and heating,” he said.

The $18,000 off road vehicle that Hart referred to is on patrol in the ditches nightly, starting at 7 pm.

The GPD has been conducting these open field patrols for the past eight to 10 years. Spencer said that the searches have become more intensive of late, as CSA officers have been actively searching.

In 2016, there were 71 deaths in Gallup, four of which were attributed to hyperthermia related injuries. In the same year, the Na’Nizhoozhi Center, Inc., where CSAs drop folks off to detox, reported servicing 18,107 people, which was a three percent decrease from the 2015 total of 18,600.

GPD Lt. Francie Martinez is assigned to the patrol. He noted that police and CSA officers work together for safety reasons.

“We deploy the UTV when necessary,” he said. “Some of these homeless people set up campsites with tents, shelters, old mattresses and any items that can be used. We work with code enforcement to go in and shut down the camps.”

Campsites like these ones can prove dangerous.

“Sometimes [campsite occupants] start fires and in the past, this resulted in brush fires,” Martinez said.

ON THE JOB AND ON PATROL

Officer Timothy Hughte began his Dec. 11 patrol with his partner, K9 officer Kuno. Kuno is a Belgian Malinois and is six-years-old.

Hughte, a 10 year veteran of the job, has five years as a law enforcement officer and five years as a CSA.

He said the toughest part about being a CSA was answering all the calls that came in.

But Hughte has a positive outlook on the direction safety is headed in Gallup. Since the time he started on open field patrol, the number of calls has decreased, he believes.

Kuno is one of four K9 Officers in the GPD. Together, he and Hughte perform building and vehicle searches.

“Kuno is a dual-purpose dog,” Hughte said. “He does patrol work, narcotics, field searches and tracking. We’re on [duty] 24-7, 365. He’s my fur baby.”

The radio crackle signaled the start of the shift for the Gallup K9 unit. It relayed their first report: aggravated battery and kidnapping.

Later, at 4:57 pm, a report came in of parked vehicles obstructing the roadway on Boyd Avenue.

“The number of calls we get really depends on the time and day of the month,” he said. “We get a lot of calls of the first of the month. You see an influx and this small city suddenly becomes a population of 100,000. The local motels fill up and sellout on first of the month.”

There is an influx of intoxication calls at that time of the month, too.

At 5:18 pm, a domestic violence call came in regarding an intoxicated male at a trailer court on the west side of town. Hughte responded and was met by backup police officers Steven Peshlakai and Justin Foster.

A woman answered the door and told officers she was the sister of the man in question. She said that her brother came over intoxicated and that she did not want to let him in because she feared he might cause trouble. She said he found a ride back home to Arizona.

Intoxication calls often outnumber regular calls for service, Hughte said.

The GPD is taking steps to integrate its presence into the community, beyond patrolling or intervention when a problem arises.

“Sometimes, we have our shift meetings downtown in an effort to be visible and create an omnipresence. We like to get out there and surprise people,” Hughte said. “Sometimes people come up to us and talk. We encourage that, we’re friendly.”

But a days work means getting involved during some tense situations.

At 5:23 pm, a custodial call came in at a west side apartment that called in twice earlier in the day. The police units pulled up with lights off for the element of surprise, and made contact with a female in possession of court documents.

The district court documents she held named her for custody and referred to a restraining order that was filed against her spouse. The officers spent time speaking with the grandmother and mother of the child in question.

Such custody disputes take time and Hughte knew that this call would take a while to complete.

Eventually, CYFD was called at the request of the father.

As 7 pm rolled around, the open field patrol began.

“I commend each officer I serve with in the city of Gallup. Hats off to my Gallup crew,” he said, knowing that the start of his shift is just another night protecting and serving residents of Gallup and beyond.

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