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Just the Facts!

The Garfield County Sheriff's Office Volunteer Program Application Process

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It appears that the issue of volunteers being required to submit applications and pass a background check has caused some controversy. It also appears that a very select few members and former members of the Garfield County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue Team have chosen to be vocal about their opinion as to the policy decisions made by me. In short, the standard for ANY person associated with and representing the Sheriff's Office shall be cleared through a thorough background investigation albeit a paid employee or a volunteer.

The decision for elevating the screening of volunteers was simple. Volunteers expose the organization to the exactly the same liability as does a paid employee. So the basic litmus test is that a volunteer must have the same credibility as a paid employee. Or put another way, ***why would I have you volunteer for this organization if you couldn't pass a background check to be hired as a paid employee?*** The obvious answer is that I won't. There are several people with various opinions as to how extensive or basic that background should be. My decision was to do a thorough enough process that I am comfortable with the individual representing me and the Sheriff's Office. That decision was based primarily on several discussions I have had with other Sheriff's regarding their processes.

Further, all current volunteers are somewhat "grandfathered" in by only being required to submit a current application which includes a Personal History Statement and a CVSA questionnaire. This information is adequate to "update" our current volunteer pool. In addition to these documents, all new volunteers will be required to complete a CVSA (Computerized Voice Stress Analysis) and a "pre-employment" drug screen. The opinions of former volunteers, columnists who enjoy two minutes of fame or mislead letter writers to the papers is irrelevant to me since it is my personal liability on the line, as well as the county's, not theirs.

Now comes a few members (and former members) of Search and Rescue (SAR) who have decided that they do not want to comply with my requirements and think they have me backed into a corner. I believe it was Winston Churchill who said that cemeteries are filled with irreplaceable people! They should strongly consider Mr. Churchill's wisdom. The authority to provide search and rescue operations is statutorily the Sheriff's, CRS 24-32-2107(10), not an independent group of people who enjoy operating under a 501C3. Although I would hate to see it happen, these individuals who choose to ignore my polices may choose to resign from SAR, or be removed, if necessary. Hopefully, many of our members will realize this is a minor issue and continue to serve the

community for the greater good. Regardless, we will continue to comply with the law and provide the best possible search and rescue efforts in the county. I will not be held hostage by as few short-sighted people that are selfishly thinking about themselves rather than the organization that they volunteer for, or their fellow volunteers. They are currently discussing the option of acting as an independent SAR organization and believe I will need their assistance. They even went as far as to think they could take revenues generated by a fundraiser and hide them in an unknown bank account, in clear violation of Garfield County Resolution 2003-14 and potential embezzlement charges. When they are sitting around someone's living room with no equipment to operate and no phone calls requesting their help, they will realize where I stand on this issue. Interestingly, I attempted to arrange a meeting for this Thursday (10/20) to open up lines of communication and once again discuss this issue. However, I was told that most of the board members were hunting and unavailable! How ironic that this same organization that is suggesting that the GCSO can't provide adequate search and rescue response without them, are now telling me that they are unavailable during this busy time of year!

A piece of this issue concerns financial information. Every background investigation training we attend emphasizes the importance of a good credit history. Although we do not base our decisions to accept a volunteer very heavily on this area alone, it is a potential disqualifier. Why? Because people who have a bad credit *history* (excluding recent economic times) which include foreclosures, repossessions, garnishments and evictions represent a high risk individual. The reason a mortgage company doesn't loan money to this person is because they are not trustworthy, have a history of being irresponsible and show a disregard for other people's property or money. Why would I want to take a chance on this type of person either operating our equipment or going into someone's home? Until volunteering becomes mandated by law, I don't have to take a chance on this person and I won't.

In case anyone is curious about our success in this process, while doing background checks on our volunteers, it was discovered that one of them had a warrant for their arrest and a Victim Specialist had previously been arrested for Domestic Violence! Now, does that confirm the need to scrutinize our volunteers before we allow them to come in contact with the people we are trying to help? I certainly think so.

Finally, I have heard the statement that this is a power issue for me. Nothing could be further from the truth. Being familiar with the civil judicial system due to ridiculous law suites, I have a responsibility to the organization and the county to protect them from potential problems. I must show a standard of "due diligence" in these matters because the opposite of that is negligence and we have no ground to stand on and defend ourselves without it. These decisions are made for the benefit of the Garfield County Sheriff's Office and Garfield County. That's how I make decisions as the Sheriff; organization first.

I hope this better explains recent decisions made by me when it comes to running the Sheriff's Office. Please feel free to openly discuss any matters of concern with me. The GCSO is a transparent organization when it comes to sharing information. I am at a loss to understand how a simple policy change created so much misinformation and generated so many opinions as to how to run the GCSO. However, I am standing firm on my decision and will not allow outside interests to influence my determination to do what's best for the safety of our community.

Lou Vallario
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