

The deputy is IN

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Marcia Reid was standing at her kitchen sink one night when she heard what sounded "like a blast of dynamite," and she nearly dropped a plate. Her neighbor had fired a rifle on his property. Reid was disturbed. She had enjoyed the peace and quiet of her Wupatki Trails home, but with neighbors using firearms to shoot prairie dogs or for target practice, she felt the environment was unsafe.

"We have visitors, pets, children in the neighborhood. People want to be able to ride their horses safely on the trails," she says.

She set about gathering information about the regulations for firearm use, and she discovered that such shooting was legal on personal property and on surrounding Forest Service land. Her

inquiries eventually led her to the sheriff's department, and to her community deputy, Mick Vlieg.

"He was very nice," Reid says of Deputy Vlieg. "He came to my home one evening, and we sat and talked for a good hour. He asked questions, and we talked about different ways of approaching the problem." He had brought along 30 pages of legislation for her to read.

The homeowners' association later invited Vlieg to address firearm use at a meeting of the residents. At the end of the discussion, the association voted to impose rules restricting shooting in the subdivision. Reid is pleased with the outcome.

"[I] really appreciate that they have the community program. I didn't want to just call the police on our neighbors," she says. "I felt like [the sheriff's department] dealt with it in a very diplomatic way."

THREE FOR DONEY PARK

Deputy Vlieg is one of three community deputies for the Doney Park area, his area of focus being Timberline/Fernwood. Deputy Pat Barr covers Doney Park West from Highway 89 to Slayton Ranch Road, and Deputy Gerrit Boeck's responsibility is Doney Park East, from Slayton Ranch Road to Winona.

Each deputy lives in Doney Park, so he's already a part of the community. A number of other officers and jail staff live in the area as well, so it's not uncommon to see a white vehicle, with the familiar sheriff's department insignia, parked in a Doney Park neighborhood. Reid notes that at least two sheriff's deputies live in her development alone.

Patrol Sergeant David Ramos, a 20-year veteran of the department and 7-year resident of Doney Park, explains that the community deputy is a point of contact for ongoing issues such as neighbor disputes. The deputy spends as much time as possible in his assigned area, though he will go to calls in other areas if needed. Each deputy works a different shift.

In general, Ramos says, "70 percent of the time, someone is out here [in Doney Park]. There's a lot of energy, a growing population." Though Mormon Lake, Munds Park, Kachina Village and Parks each have a community deputy, the Doney Park area receives the most emphasis because of high population, increased calls for service, Cromer School and traffic complaints, he says.

Sheriff-elect Bill Pribil says community deputies also serve as a reference point for problems unrelated to law enforcement.

"When someone has an issue in the county, they should be able to ask that officer, and the officer will refer them to the appropriate department. If there are community concerns about abandoned vehicles, dangerous intersections, a perceived need for street lights — the officer can facilitate a meeting with the appropriate people," says Pribil.

Lt. Mark Christian formerly served as the community deputy in Kachina Village, during which time he worked with Parks and Recreation to install a basketball court. The officers become advocates for the community by attending neighborhood meetings, keeping a finger on the pulse of the area, and determining possible needs and how they might be met.

In Doney Park, the deputies use Summit Fire Station #32 on Koch Field Road as a quasi-substation. They hold meetings there, use the phones, and occasionally operate command centers — all through Summit's willingness to share its facilities. Recently a DUI task force was stationed at Summit Station #33 on Highway 89.

DONEY PARK GROWING FAST

Pribil says Doney Park is the highest activity area in the unincorporated regions of the county, and it has the most people. Because of high growth, response times are increased.

Sheriff's office statistics estimate that 10,564 people lived in the Doney Park area at the end of 2003, up from the 2000 census figure of 8,960. If it were incorporated, Doney Park would be the second largest city in Coconino County. By comparison, the city of

Williams, had an estimated population of 2,910 at the end of 2003, according to the Coconino County Web site.

Ramos says residents don't always realize that response times in the county will naturally differ from those in an urban area. He says a conservative estimate for average response time to a call in Doney Park would be 20 minutes.

"A number of people have moved [to Doney Park] from cities where response times for fire, medical emergency and law enforcement were immediate. That's one of the downsides to living in a rural setting. You don't have immediate response to your emergency," notes Ramos.

As the population grows, calls resulting from neighbor tensions rise as well.

"There are disputes over property boundaries all the time," notes Deputy Barr. "There'll be an old rickety fence somewhere, and someone will say, 'Well, I had this property surveyed, and it's supposed to be over here,' so they go at it. People have dogs and the dogs attack each other and the neighbors get at it."

Deputy Vlieg urges residents to resolve neighbor problems by talking.

"Neighbor issues ought to be resolved by neighbors. We have a few feuds that have been going on over a period of months. They're brewing. We will step in when we're called, yet very seldom does that resolve the issue quickly. We've got a couple of frequent fliers that have been quite childish in their actions."

"We've got a pretty good way of dealing with that," asserts Vlieg. "We will sit down with both [parties] on neutral turf over a cup of coffee. We've had very, very good success with that in resolving differences."

Yet sometimes all attempts at mediation are futile, and the problem takes a violent turn. One neighbor was charged with aggravated assault after taking a large rock and throwing it at the other even while the incident was being videotaped.

"Now he's on probation for three years," remembers Vlieg. "It was all over attitudes. Just two hard-headed folks — it became a personal issue and not an acceptable dispute between neighbors. One had to win."

SERIOUS ABOUT SPEEDING

With the ever-increasing population, Deputy Boeck says speeding has become an urgent issue in the Doney Park area.

"People say drivers are going upwards of 50 mph in a 30 or 25 mph zone. That's our biggest problem right now," urges Boeck.

"We're going to be taking more enforcement action. People are running stop signs; I've had a number of complaints out in Cosnino, also, especially in the morning, when kids are waiting for buses."

Boeck says he doesn't want to see the worst thing happen. "You have five or six kids waiting for the bus out there, somebody driving to work, talking on the cell phone, shaving, putting on their makeup, not paying attention. Whatever we can do to slow people down, that's what we'll do."

Ramos urges residents to "get off the phone" and pay attention to driving, especially during the high traffic hours when people are going to and from work.

Boeck has been a Doney Park community deputy for about 18 months. Before joining the sheriff's office two years ago, he was a park ranger for the state of Arizona. He applied for a community deputy position in part because of its similarity to ranger work, in which he enjoyed reaching out to the public.

"Just being able to work in same community day after day - you get to know people. Every community has its own problems; you get the chance to take a proactive approach, do some problem solving."

He also notes the finer aspects of the job.

"You don't get paid more, but you get to do more special projects.

Plus, you get a take-home car!" says Boeck, laughing.

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