

Mesa police rely on heavy-duty laptops COPS 'Toughbooks'

By Patricia Biggs
The Arizona Republic

Mesa police patrol officers are turning in their workbooks for Panasonic "Toughbooks" - laptop computers so rugged they can withstand the Arizona heat and a drop from a moving car.

"It replaces about four or five thick manuals that police officers had to carry around at all times," said John Werner, information systems coordinator for the Police Department.

The laptops will be used for report writing and traffic accident diagrams, and officers in cruisers will get their dispatch calls over the laptop.

Mesa police recently bought 575 of the laptops with money provided by a federal grant program, Community Oriented Policing Services, started by then-President Clinton. It provided funds for items municipalities might otherwise have to put off and has put thousands of police officers on the streets since 1994.

More cops equals less crime. That is the theory behind the COPS program, which in 1994 targeted \$8.6 billion nationally to hire 100,000 officers.

In November, President Bush signed a bill renewing the COPS program and funding \$1.1 billion nationally for the next year.

Since it started, Phoenix, Mesa, Tempe, Chandler and Gilbert have received a total of more than \$78 million. Their police departments have used the federal funds to hire sworn officers and civilians, improve technology, provide officers in schools and explore new programs.

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Photos by Russell Gates/The Arizona Republic

John Werner, information systems coordinator, pulls out a "Toughbook" from storage shelves. Werner helps Mesa police Officer Matt Lejcar (seated) use the laptop computer.

Community Oriented Policing Services program

President Clinton's 1994 crime bill included a federal grant program designed to put more police officers on the streets. A look at how some Valley municipalities and agencies have benefited:

Municipality	Funds received*	Full-time officers or equivalent:
Chandler	\$5,621,523	76
Gilbert	\$2,628,318	35
Phoenix	\$66,068,937	700
Mesa	\$8,633,626	122
Tempe	\$5,763,980	66
Apache Junction	\$200,000	2
Queen Creek	\$75,000	1
Scottsdale	\$5,584,781	100
Pinal County sheriff	\$298,877	3
Maricopa County sheriff	\$4,092,833	73
Salt River-Pima-Maricopa	\$1,282,462	15
Guadalupe	\$90,000	1

*As of Oct. 16, 2001

Source: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice

Joanna Herrero/The Arizona Republic



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"Seed money enables us to take a little bit of a risk and go out and search for things that are good for our community," said Melissa Poure, who works with the Chandler Police Department in a program called Preventing Abuse and Violence through Education.

Tempe used COPS funds to hire extra officers and beef up its Downtown Bike Squad. These officers patrol Mill Avenue, looking into cars as they ride alongside. They also visit with bar owners and merchants, looking for potential problems.

"You become more of a community oriented officer because you're not in a car," said Officer Jeff Lane, a department spokesman. "On bikes, you have to be in and amongst your people."

In Mesa, an overdue update in technology is being partially funded by COPS grants. Patrol officers are using laptops, which reduces the amount of time they need to spend in the office.

Dennis Donna, assistant chief of the Mesa Police Department, said the COPS program has become much more than a political platform.

"Community policing is really now the core part of the business," Donna said.

"We have gotten some great support in Mesa."

In Phoenix, the grant program has allowed precincts to hire civilians with advanced computer skills rather than expecting sworn officers to come in-off the streets and learn to build databases.

"That's just been a godsend for us," Phoenix police Commander Rich Groeneveld said. "Instead of trying to put that square peg in the round hole, you've got a much better fit."

Lacey Cox, who writes grant proposals for the Gilbert Police Department, said COPS goes beyond numbers of officers and laptops.

"It's a whole different way of thinking," Cox said.

The program encourages beat officers to not simply respond to calls but to look for potential problems and come up with solutions.

"You give more control to your beat officers," Cox said.

But it requires money, and that's where the grants have made a difference, she said.

"If you want to do community policing, you need to have an adequate number of police officers. You can't do it if you're running from call to call."

COPS encourages citizen involvement with a police department through such means as neighborhood crime prevention groups, review boards and volunteers. It also recommends that officers stay in beats at least a year, allowing them to form relationships with the people they serve.

"The whole concept behind it is, 'We're in this together,'" Cox said.

Mesa's "Toughbooks" will allow patrol cars to send satellite signals to headquarters so dispatchers can track officers.

Although most laptops are delicate instruments, the Toughbooks have magnesium alloy cases and shock absorption. One in use by the Police Department in Cass County, Mo., took a .45 caliber slug and kept working.

Werner, a retired lieutenant who spent 21 years on the force, said, "I sure wish I had one of these when I was out on the streets."

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