

Armadillos: Starting a Trend

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Summary

The Peoria Police Department was determined to find a solution to smaller quality of life issues plaguing most communities like loud music, litter, loitering, disorderly conduct, and more generally unsupervised and ill-mannered youth. An approach was needed that would be innovative, economical and effective in combating problem properties that can destabilize an otherwise peaceful neighborhood. The Department needed an obvious presence to confront the problems.

The Department experimented with parking an older unattended police car directly in front of the problematic drug house. The goal was to disrupt the drug trafficking merely by the presence of a uniformed squad car. The tactic was initially thought to be proven ineffective when the squad was found badly vandalized the next morning. Intelligence indicated the drug dealer was responsible. Further assessment determined that it was not the tactic that failed; it was the vulnerability of the vehicle. A new vehicle was needed that could defend the type of attack incurred by the squad car. The Department possessed an older donated armored truck that sat dormant for several years that was designated “*Armadillo*” for its tough exterior. It required fortification to prevent tires from being flattened and lights from being broken. It was outfitted with a surveillance system, had decals applied stating “Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle” and topped off with emergency lights.

The Department created a Nuisance Abatement Officer position who researches properties for excessive police reports, calls-for-service and other complaints to determine if the Armadillo should be utilized. When a suitable location is identified, the Armadillo is parked in front of the problem property for several days, virtually eliminating the nuisance behavior. Our experience reveals that voluntary compliance by the tenants and/or action by landlords comes as a direct result of Armadillo deployment. The immediate response to a troubled neighborhood is the Armadillo’s strongest asset. The community sees a very rapid and visible presence from the police when the Armadillo shows up in front of a problem property. They realize their complaints have not fallen upon deaf ears and thus far public reaction has

been overwhelmingly positive. The Armadillo concept is very affordable for smaller to mid-size cities wherein targeting a property with officers can be very labor intensive. The Peoria Police Department has since deployed a second Armadillo and is receiving the same benefits as we did from the original, still at a fraction of the cost of a police officer.

Scanning

The City of Peoria is a community with a population of 113,546 according to a 2007 estimate and is a part of a metropolitan area with a population of 370,000. It is the largest city on the Illinois River and it is also the home of the world headquarters for the Caterpillar Tractor Company (a fortune 50 corporation). Peoria is a very diverse city with an urban center, transitioning to a more suburban environment on the outer fringes. Peoria has a long and colorful history playing a prominent and integral part of the Vaudeville theater era. There is a saying that goes, "if it plays in Peoria, it will play anywhere," which essentially means that if something works well in Peoria, it is something that would likely work well nationally. Our submitted project, "Armadillo - Starting a Trend," is playing well in Peoria and is now on its way to playing well in other parts of the Nation.

Over the last several years, the Peoria Police Department has shifted its focus to not only address traditional crime, but rather to stress the need to "sweat the small stuff." This new focus targets nuisance behaviors that undermine the quality of life (QOL) in our neighborhoods. Both law enforcement and their community partners are becoming more cognizant of the negative impact on our neighborhoods when nuisance behavior is not abated. Citizens do care about the noise, the loud music, the litter, the loitering, the disorderly conduct, and the anti-social behavior that can be a disruptive force, destroying the sense of peace and safety. One classic crime that may constitute the greatest threat to QOL is illegal drug trafficking. So often we find that the areas that are most plagued by open air drug markets are the same areas where the other nuisance behaviors are most prevalent. In communities that are most affected, it is common to find that the greatest negative influences within the area can be traced to a select few, known problem households or retail businesses.

The police department was tasked to find a method that would provide citizens with a quicker response to identifying, responding to, and abating nuisance properties. By the very nature of the quality of life issues displayed and their overt offensiveness, it is usually no secret to either the community residents or the police, which house, which family, or which group of like-minded individuals in a public place is working to undermine the peace of the neighborhood. Often a nuisance property is identified through citizen phone calls, emails or complaints from city officials. Identifying those problem properties is often easier than remediating them and many times our response is, at least in the eyes of the complaining neighbors, either slow or covert and hard to recognize. The public's frustration over a nuisance household can be just as much a result of a perceived lack of response by the authorities as it about the nuisance itself.

Analysis

The department attempted to find a solution to identify and combat nuisance properties involving a quick police response. Trying to obtain the tenant's voluntary compliance or attempting to utilize the landlords to pressure the tenants did not work very well. Both methods were time consuming and didn't guarantee nuisance abatement. A complex problem of multiple computer systems made it difficult to accurately track a combination of police calls-for-service, police reports and code enforcement infractions to identify properties exhibiting nuisance activity. Quality of life nuisances, when left unchecked, can lead to the deterioration of a neighborhood. Problem properties require a great deal of police resources and if little problems are ignored they can become larger problems.

During the summer of 2006, a particular problem person and his problem household became very well known in a neighborhood just to the North of the City's downtown. This individual was a known drug dealer and along with his friends and associates, had caused his place of residence to become a constant source of chaos and aggravation for the rest of the neighborhood. The Peoria Police Department employed several traditional strategies to combat the problem, including covert operations to build a criminal case for drug dealing, but our efforts met with only minimal success. Frustrations grew within the community and the department until one day, during a meeting of the command staff, the Chief

suggested parking an unmanned police car directly in front of the house. The thought was that it just might disrupt the walk-up drug traffic round-the-clock yet not require a police officer to be present. There was much discussion at the time that a marked police vehicle, left unattended in such a volatile location was likely to be damaged and perhaps damaged severely. During this discussion the staff learned that the Department was about to trade in a few very old, very used police cars and it was then decided that we would risk the damage to an old car and just see what impact, if any, it would have on the problem. Our hope was that this experiment would, at least temporarily, curb the criminal and/or nuisance behavior. On a subsequent Friday evening, the marked police car was parked at the curb, directly in front of the nuisance property and was left there unattended. By the early morning hours the next day, an officer was dispatched to that location for a report of a damaged police car. The officer responded and found the car had been nearly demolished. Every piece of glass on the car was smashed, from the windshield to the headlights. The sheet metal was damaged, tires flattened, and foreign objects littered the interior. A bike frame was found lying on top of the back seat and chunks of stone were on the floor. The vehicle was no longer drivable and had to be towed to the police garage, in full view of the drug dealers and the legitimate community members.

Someone had gone to a considerable amount of trouble to convey just how strongly they objected to a police car being parked at that particular spot. While proving that an unmanned squad car could not be left unattended it was evident that the drug dealer was angry and tried to intimidate the department as his presence does to the neighbors. The mere presence of a marked police vehicle was disruptive enough and antagonistic enough to this drug dealer and his operation that he was willing to expose himself to arrest and prosecution for causing the damage. Now the question that came to mind was “How do we have the same effect and not have to suffer the destruction of police cars?” The experiment was the hot topic of the ensuing Monday morning command staff meeting. Initially there was some sentiment in the room that our experiment was a failure and that it was an embarrassment for the Department to allow this to happen in a public place and worse, to have to haul the car away with a tow truck in full view of the entire neighborhood. It was not unreasonable to come away with the perception that the bad guy won.

This was especially true since early intelligence indicated that it was the drug dealer himself who damaged the car. Through discussion, an entirely different theory emerged. Perhaps the damaged car was proof that the experiment was a success. Perhaps it demonstrated that the drug dealers were extremely unhappy about a police car being parked in front of their house. If this were true, the problem was not tactic, it was the tool we were using. We needed to find a way to have the same affect, without having to tow another squad car. The answer to this question did not become known for some time and the project was temporarily shelved.

Response

One day while driving past the police parking, the Chief's attention was caught by an old armored car that the police had received years ago via a donation from Brinks. The vehicle had been intended for tactical operations but essentially it sat dormant. Recalling the damage suffered by the old squad car parked in front of the dealer's house, the idea for an armored Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle was born. The truck seemed to have the ability to serve the intended purpose of the marked squad car, yet even without modification was already much better suited to the task of being deployed and exposed to attack. Additionally, the armored car offered the possibility of being even more visible while making a much grander statement to both the neighborhood and the targeted miscreants. Moreover, the truck would be able to afford an immediate response to neighbor complaints which was paramount and the department would have an inexpensive, round-the-clock presence in front of nuisance properties.

It was at this point that we began to examine the strengths and weaknesses of using the truck for nuisance property deterrence. The truck was a hardened target but still presented weak spots that could be open to attack. The headlights and taillights were exposed to possible breakage and the tires were capable of being punctured. The current condition of the truck at that point in time, with it being predominantly armored while still having a so-to-speak vulnerable underbelly, gave rise to what the final product was to become known as the "Armadillo." Clearly if we were to deploy the

Armadillo in our most troubled areas of town and leave it completely unmanned and unguarded, the vehicle needed even further fortification.

A cooperative effort by a technician, the public works vehicle facility and several local vendors were instrumental in refurbishing the armored truck into a fortified surveillance vehicle. Unneeded vents that could allow access to the interior were sealed to prevent vandalism. A digital recorder and surveillance system consisting of five infrared cameras were mounted on the top of the box to provide 360 degree coverage. The camera view was a fish eye type that captures any angular approach to the Armadillo but still provides a sharp image of the target house. The Armadillo was outfitted with headlight and taillight screens; a locking fuel cap; a padlocked hood; and foam filled tires to prevent them from going flat. Once the Armadillo was fortified, large gold lettered decals were placed on all sides that read, "Peoria Police Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle." Emergency lights were mounted on the roof to make it even more conspicuous. A digital recorder was mounted inside the cab that has a removable hard drive for down loading or making DVDs. The system also has a multiplex LCD monitor which allows the operator to align the cameras for the optimum view while deploying the vehicle. The cameras serve a dual purpose in that they can both document illegal activities in the area, as well as deter vandalism to the truck itself. Fully equipped and fortified, the Armadillo is a virtually indestructible surveillance vehicle to discourage and prevent illegal narcotics activity and the various nuisance activities that impact the quality of life. The vehicle is designed to be imposing and prominent, one might say intentionally ugly and obnoxious. The two main goals for the vehicle are to curb illegal activity, and restore peace and quiet to a troubled neighborhood. In addition to dissuading illegal activity, the vehicle offers a few side benefits that have nearly overshadowed the primary goals. When problems are quickly addressed with the Armadillo, citizens feel a sense of security and relief. The moment the Armadillo arrives in front of a problem property, it says two things very distinctly. It says to the law abiding, good people in the area, "we have heard your complaints and we want to help you stop the chaos." It says to the thugs

and the miscreants, “You have dedicated your time to make life miserable for your neighbors we will now dedicate our time to give you a taste of what that feels like.”

Assessment

On July 10, 2008, the Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle (Armadillo) was deployed for its first real test. The event was showcased to the Peoria community through the local print and television media. The local newspaper featured an article titled, “Police aim to annoy problem residents.” The citizen blog comments were 95% favorable, congratulating the Department for thinking out of the box. The department received many emails and phone calls endorsing the Armadillo as well as requesting immediate placement in front of a problem property. Coincidentally, the first deployment location was on the same street about a block from where the original police car was damaged.

The Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle project was fairly easy to coordinate. The concept of the Armadillo is to park it directly in front of a problem property and hopefully encourage the tenant become a better neighbor. If the property happens to be a drug house, the presence of the Armadillo deters customers. When the department gets a request for the Armadillo, the address is researched by a Nuisance Abatement Officer. The criteria that qualifies for the Armadillo includes drug trafficking complaints, quality of life issues such as loitering, loud music, excessive calls-for-service, chronic police crime reports, traffic violations, and code enforcement complaints. The Armadillo is parked for three to five days in front of a property that has been determined to be essentially a cancer to the neighborhood. The landlord/property owner is notified of the Armadillo’s deployment and the reason it is there. The Armadillo has developed the reputation that if it is parked in front of your residence then you have a problem not only with the Police Department but also with your landlord. One of the great advantages we are experiencing is that the project takes very few man hours to operate.

Our experience thus far with the Armadillo has been overwhelmingly positive and the program has exceeded our hopes. Requests by the community for the Armadillo have far exceeded our supply and the public feedback has been phenomenal. Problem properties require a great deal of police resources and

if little problems are ignored they can become larger problems. The following areas have all shown to be substantial positive outcomes directly related to the project:

- **Crime Reduction:** The effectiveness of the Armadillo being deployed reveals a significant decrease in police reports and calls-for-service.
- **Restoration of Peace:** In response to a request for help, the Armadillo was strategically parked across an intersection from a problem property to ensure there would be no confusion as to the Armadillo's intentions. On Monday a lengthy voicemail thanking the Department for the peace and quiet restored to the neighborhood comparing it to the tranquility of twenty years ago.
- **Immediate Deployment of the Armadillo:** The citizen senses instant gratification and the problem tenants feel immediate pressure when the Armadillo is parked.
- **Landlord involvement:** Most landlords appreciate notification when the Armadillo is parked in front of one of their properties and they are willing to do what is necessary to abate the problem. They may already be looking for a reason to evict and the lease will usually cover tenant behavior. Landlord and police relations have improved and the Nuisance Abatement Officer often attends housing court to testify for the landlord.
- **Police Department Website:** A direct link was created to the police Department website listing the dates and locations the Armadillo has "visited." An email link to the Nuisance Abatement Officer to request the Armadillo is also available.
- **Public Satisfaction:** The Armadillo was a success with the Peoria neighborhood associations during the National "Night out against Crime." The Armadillo was driven to as many neighborhood block parties as possible. See photograph in Appendix E.

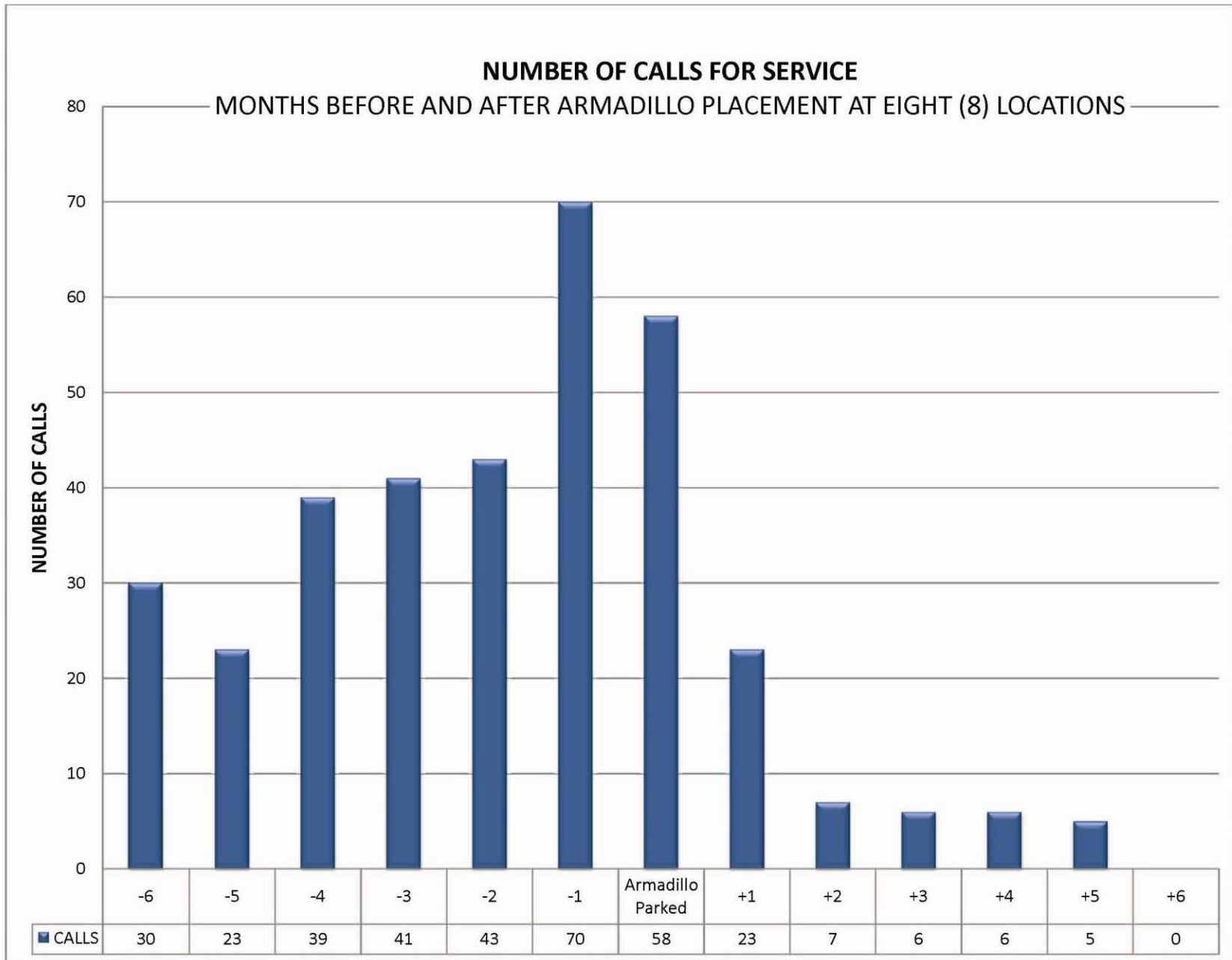
The effectiveness of the Armadillo is measured by analyzing calls-for-service, police crime reports, code enforcement complaints and citizen complaints preceding the placement of the Armadillo compared to the data collected after the Armadillo is removed. The line graph in Appendix A depicts calls for service at eight different locations in Peoria where a problem property was "visited" by the Armadillo.

The Y-axis reflects calls-for-service and the X-axis reflects the months prior to the placement of the Armadillo, when the Armadillo was parked and the months after the Armadillo was picked up. As the data reveals, the number of calls-for-service before the Armadillo was parked exceeded the calls-for-service after the Armadillo was picked up. In fact, within 2-4 months after parking the Armadillo at a problem property the calls-for-service disappeared. The time taken for the calls-for-service to come to an end at the eight locations depended on the time taken to follow through on nuisance abatement or eviction. Other methods to evaluate the Armadillo's impact are more subjective like positive feedback from neighbors and deployment requests for the Armadillo. But most rewarding are the phone calls from citizens thanking you for your immediate intervention and helping revitalize their neighborhood.

On August 17, 2009 the Armadillo was a feature story on the front page of the Wall Street Journal in addition to a four-minute video interview on the Wall Street Journal website. The following morning, Fox News (national network) conducted a live phone interview with the Chief, displaying the Armadillo on a national scale. ABC News in New York called about two weeks later wanting to do a feature article on the Armadillo and there have been several interviews with out of state media outlets. In October of 2009 the Armadillo project was showcased at the Illinois Municipal League of Cities annual conference in Chicago and the Regional Network Neighborhood Conference in Decatur, Illinois. Both presentations received very positive reviews by the attendees.

On March 9, 2010 Armadillo II, Peoria Police's second nuisance vehicle was unveiled at a Peoria City Council meeting. Armadillo II is similar to the first model but was painted in a black and white retro scheme which is graffiti resistant. This later model has nearly twice the number of surveillance cameras as the original. The lettering and badge decals are now complemented by an armadillo caricature. Similar to the first truck, this Armadillo went through the same fortification process. It has ten infrared cameras mounted on the sides and corners of the roof. The cameras provide different views of the target property while providing a seeping 360 degree view. The cost for Armadillo II was approximately \$7,500.00 more than Armadillo I due to more extensive paint and body work, bringing the total cost to \$18,000.00.

The exposure of the Armadillo program has prompted at least twenty-eight law enforcement agencies to contact us. A table of the agencies and their status are displayed in Appendix B. Some of those agencies already have in operation their very own version of the Armadillo as displayed by the photos in Appendix C and D. The Peoria Police Department will continue to network and provide assistance to law enforcement agencies contemplating their own project. Departments thinking about starting their own Armadillo program are welcome to make site visits to Peoria. We continue to expect the public response to all Armadillo programs to be overwhelmingly positive and that a community's investment will provide value at a fraction of the cost.



Appendix B

Law Enforcement Agency	Location	Status
Columbia Police Department	Columbia, MO	Peoria visit – A truck has been assured to the department
Richmond County Sheriff's Office	Augusta, GA	Trying to obtain a truck
Louisville Metro Police Department	Louisville, KY	Funds budgeted – waiting for truck
Green Bay Police Department	Green Bay, WI	Still in planning phase
Hemet Police Department	Hemet, CA	“The Hammer” – waiting on a truck
Savannah-Chatham Metro Police Department	Savannah, GA	Couldn't obtain a truck – personnel change
Panama City Police Department	Panama City, FL	“The RHINO” (Remote Hardened Illegal Nuisance Observer) deployed on February 23, 2010.
Kansas City Police Department	Kansas City, MO	E-mailed Information
Lafayette Police Department	Lafayette, LA	“The Armadillo” (Crime Suppression Surveillance Vehicle) is operational since January 25, 2011.
Sarasota County Sheriff's Office	Sarasota, FL	The “Crime Surveillance Unit” – waiting on a truck
Topeka Police Department	Topeka, KA	Trying to obtain a truck
Kenosha Police Department	Kenosha, WI	Trying to obtain a truck
Montgomery County Sheriff's Office	Dayton, OH	E-mailed Information
Peoria Police Department	Peoria, AZ	Discussion phase with Command
Arvada Police Department	Arvada, CO	Awaiting Council approval
Bismarck Police Department	Bismarck, ND	Provided Information
Greenville Police Department	Greenville, NC	Provided Information
Roswell Police Department	Roswell, GA	Provided Information
Baton Rouge Police Department	Baton Rouge, LA	E-mailed Information
Racine Police Department	Racine, WI	“The NPAV” (Nuisance Property Abatement Vehicle) deployed on December 6, 2009
Utica Police Department	Utica, NY	“The Armadillo” is operational deployed August 26, 2010
Milwaukee Police Department	Milwaukee, WI	Nuisance Property Surveillance Vehicle is operational deployed August 10, 2010
St Clair County Sheriff's Department	Belleville, IL	“The Exterminator” – is operational deployed November 10, 2010
San Diego Sheriff's Department	Vista, CA	E-mailed Information
Connecticut State Police	CT	Still in planning phase
Palm Bay Police Department	Palm Bay, FL	Early planning stages
Leesburg Police Department	Leesburg, VA	E-mailed Information
Lima Police Department	Lima, OH	E-mailed Information

Appendix C



The Panama City, Florida Police Department's "RHINO"



The "NPAV" Racine, Wisconsin Police Department



Lafayette, Louisiana Police Department's "Armadillo"

Appendix D



Milwaukee, Wisconsin Police Department's Nuisance Surveillance Vehicle



The "Exterminator" St. Clair County, Illinois Sheriff's Department



The "Armadillo" Utica, New York Police Department

Appendix E



Two youngsters at a neighborhood association event