



Police forces picking up surplus military supplies

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A growing number of law enforcement agencies are taking advantage of a program that gives them free surplus military equipment left over from U.S. military campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The Department of Defense's 1033 program, which Congress passed in 1997 to expand on a 1991 initiative, initially aimed to give surplus military equipment for police use in counter-narcotic and counter-terrorism situations.

Now, with the government giving away thousands of Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, weapons and more pedestrian items such as cars and clothing, even smaller police departments in cities and towns with low crime rates are acquiring items.

Documents from the Defense Logistics Agency's Law Enforcement Support Office show the number of agencies requesting equipment has steadily increased since 2009. Although there was a slight dip from 2012 to 2013, year-to-date totals are on pace to increase again for 2014.

Although the departments don't pay for the materials, they pay for shipment to their location and potential storage and maintenance, agency spokeswoman Michelle McCaskill said.

Bill Johnson, the executive director of the National Association of Police Organizations, said although his agency doesn't maintain statistics, small to mid-size departments appear to make more requests because their larger counterparts already have the necessary materials.

"It's their turn to get some of this equipment," he said. "They have the opportunity to do so now."

Although most agencies are happy to receive items at little to no cost, some are concerned the program "blurs" the lines between police and military.

The eight person department in Morven, Ga., often receives equipment such as Chevrolet Tahoes that can be used as patrol cars. Police Chief Lynwood Yates said when he arrived 20 years ago, the department only had two cars.

"It's a way for a lot of smaller agencies to get equipment that they wouldn't be able to," he said. "For a department of our size, that's everything."

The Cato Institute, a public policy research organization, has been vocal about its opposition to the program.

"We believe civilian police officers should use the absolute minimum amount of force necessary," said Tim Lynch, director of the Institute's project on criminal justice. "The goal of the military is to find the enemy and destroy the enemy using maximum force. When you begin to blur the difference between the two ... what we find is a violation of constitutional rights and unnecessary injuries."

Among the departments that have taken advantage of the program in the last year:

- **High Springs, Fla.:** The 12-person police department in High Springs received an MRAP in the last year. Acting Police Chief Antoine Sheppard said the vehicle was acquired under former chief Steve Holley for use on rescue missions during hurricanes or floods. High Springs has not yet used the MRAP and is looking to transfer it to another agency.

- **Jefferson County, N.Y.:** Jefferson County Sheriff John P. Burns said his department acquired a Humvee a couple of years ago and then an MRAP six months ago. Burns said it ensures his police officers can be protected in a hostage situation or when executing warrants. "Before, we didn't have the armor-plated vehicles, we were basically walking right up to a residence with an armed person," he said.

- **Dakota County, Minn.:** The Dakota County Sheriff's Office received the state's first MRAP last August. It's specifically used for the Multi-Agency Assistance Group, a SWAT unit of about 35 officers made up of members from the county's 11 agencies. Dakota County Sheriff Dave Bellows said the redistributed equipment is a "good use of tax dollars." "If we were to go out and purchase the vehicle, it would be well over \$800,000," he said.

Sheppard said he doesn't understand the "controversy" surrounding MRAPs.

"It has no weapons," he said. "It's just a huge bulletproof vehicle that protects those inside of it."

He said even small towns such as High Springs — with a population of nearly 5,500 — see violent crime. Sheppard said in 2011, a gunman shot at police at the county's first school shooting.

Kara Dansky, senior counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union, said there is a lack of transparency in how the federal government doles out equipment. She said the ACLU plans to publish a report in a couple of weeks detailing "findings and recommendations" on the use of military equipment by police departments.

Yates said he has seen police chiefs get carried away by "over policing" their unit with military equipment.

"We try to repaint (vehicles) and get rid of the military appearance. You don't want to look like you're occupying an army," he said. "There has to be a happy medium. ... What's your job as a police chief? You affect the quality of life of your citizens. You can't over police it."

