



Jeffrey R. Gahler
Sheriff

Harford County Sheriff's Office

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NEWS RELEASE

Sheriff Gahler Completes Aviation Program Assessment – Returns Focus to Crime Reduction

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[July 7, 2015, Bel Air, MD] At a meeting on July 7, 2015, Sheriff Gahler announced to members of his Command Staff and County Officials that the Harford County Sheriff's Office aviation program was being discontinued. Safety, cost, focus, and usage were cited by Sheriff Gahler as the reasons for the decision.

Upon taking office in December 2014, Sheriff Gahler pledged to give a thorough review of each unit within the Office of the Sheriff, to include the newly formed Aviation Unit and use of SABLE 1. Sheriff Gahler remarked, "When assessing any program, I use two questions to guide my decision making process. Does this program have a direct impact on public safety and should the taxpayers of Harford County have to pay for this service? After a complete assessment and review of the information presented to me in the assessment, the answer to both questions is 'no'."

Safety was a key concern brought to Sheriff Gahler's attention early in the assessment. Deputies assigned to the program, supported by the assessment, cited the lack of direct supervision and oversight with aviation specific skills as a serious safety concern. Mr. Robert McGainey, a recognized expert in airborne law enforcement operations and administration, was critical of the supervisory structure overseeing the unit from its inception and the concept of personnel being assigned to the program on a part time basis. Following this revelation in March, SABLE 1 was placed in a temporary non-flight status to allow for a review of safety practices. Acting on the concerns related to the safe operation of the helicopter, Sheriff Gahler explained, "issues related to safety were something I simply could not ignore." Gahler continued, "Issues related to safety were but one area, of many, that caused me to question the aviation program. The absence of a written needs assessment and strategic plan, improper staffing, and a gross underestimation of cost are other areas identified as being deficient. Fixing the issues would prove to be an expensive option, one that would further extend the already

strained budget supporting the program.” In fact, addressing the safety and supervisory issues plaguing the unit would drive the budget to more than \$776,000. In order to correct the noted deficiencies, the Office of the Sheriff would need the aviation team to be full time, in accordance with the preferred unit model provided by the assessor and the addition of a full time aviation supervisor. Creating a full time unit is in direct conflict with Sheriff Gahler’s desire to return more deputies to the street.

The assessment reviewed Aviation Unit logs detailing specific information on each mission for SABLE 1 and crew. In a 12 month period, 118 law enforcement related missions were flown, with the original data indicating 26 missions being tied to the apprehension of a suspect and/or location of a subject. The assessment also notes without appropriate supervision, there was no standard screening tool or written instructions for launching or recording missions. After a review of the original data, it was determined the use of SABLE 1 only directly assisted in 13 of those mission outcomes. In comparison, the HCSO responds to nearly 161,000 calls for service a year; this amounts to SABLE 1 being used in .07% of all calls. A further review during the assessment, indicated allied agency aviation resources were available for use in all but one of those missions, creating a duplication of services in the aviation arena.

Operating as is, the annual costs associated with the aviation program are currently projected to be \$698,879. These dollars should be reinvested and refocused to support law enforcement efforts in the county. Sheriff Gahler commented, “The need for the aviation program would fall behind the issues we are currently facing, including; overdue pay increases for deputies, the need to hire 36 correctional deputies to staff the vacant \$31 million Detention Center expansion, a street level drug unit, and the possible \$1 million operating expense of outfitting all deputies with body cameras. Additionally, the use of drug forfeiture money should not be used for a recurring operational expense, but instead it should be reinvested to end the heroin epidemic that is plaguing the communities of Harford County”.

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Harford County Sheriff’s Office Mission

With courage, honor and integrity we protect the rights and dignity of all citizens. In partnership with our communities, we strive to preserve the peace and provide for a safe environment for all.