

AMERICAN ARMOR FOUNDATION: Protecting those who protect and serve

By Brandon Perkins



The ballistic vest has become such an integral tool in the law enforcement occupation since its widespread inception in the 1970s that it's difficult to imagine an officer working without one. With more than 3,000 credited saves, they are a necessary tool that no officer should go without; I certainly cannot imagine asking one of my officers to hit the streets without one. That being said, thousands of our brothers and sisters are currently working without a vest due to the budgetary constraints of their respective agencies.

Some agency heads must decide between maintaining their fleet and putting vests on their officers at budget time. Given the basic nature of our duties, which requires us to get to the people we are sworn to protect, it isn't surprising that fuel and maintenance win over vests in most of these cases.

This problem first came to my attention a few years ago after I read a RAND study that indicated that as many as 200,000 American police officers do not have vests.¹ This seemed like an impossible number given the universal understanding that these are a critical officer safety tool, as well as the availability of DOJ grants. Consequently, I decided to conduct more research into the matter and I discovered

that, while it is difficult to attach an exact number to it, the problem is very real.

A February 2010 article by 12 News out of Beaumont, Texas, highlights two south Texas police departments that could not afford vests for their officers.² Chief Jeff Clopp of the Kirbyville PD told reporters, "I can't afford to buy my officers vests," and Silsbee PD's Chief Dennis Allen stated, "We're having to make do without a lot of things [including vests] because it all goes back to money."

Another article detailed how higher ranking officers were going without vests in one department after passing theirs down to the patrol officers.³ The vests were more than 10 years old and had not been fitted to the officers.

I have since talked to other agency heads who have told me about their jurisdiction's inability to purchase vests for their officers. I wondered if any of these agency heads had attempted to apply for the DOJ's vest grant program, and more research helped me understand that some had, in fact, applied and were unsuccessful. Others couldn't even afford to pay the matching grant required by the program. Smaller agencies, which are most affected by this issue, lack both the resources

to apply and manage these grants and the funding to pay for vests up front and wait for partial reimbursement from the DOJ.

This discovery and subsequent research led me to start the American Armor Foundation Inc., a national 501(c)3 non-profit. Our mission is to help agencies in the poorest areas of the United States purchase vests for their officers through tax-deductible contributions from individuals and businesses that are supportive of this need. In order to ensure that we get the most out of every dollar donated, we have secured a pricing arrangement with a Georgia-based dealer that allows us to buy vests for \$432 each, which is a huge savings over the average cost of a vest.

From the beginning, we wanted to make sure that the American Armor

Foundation would be able to accomplish exactly what it was created to do with every dollar donated. Consequently, one of the founding principles of our organization is that a minimum of 90 percent of our revenue will go directly toward the purchase of vests. This means working hard to keep our operating costs low and, to that end, we have no central office, no paid employees, and no professional fundraisers who get a profit from the revenue they generate on our behalf.

The foundation recently launched its flagship “Monthly Heroes” fundraising campaign with a goal to find 1,000 individuals who will commit to donating \$3 to \$5 per month. Once this goal is achieved, we will be able to consistently provide between 80 and 130 vests to officers in need each year.

There are several ways that individuals can help us carry out our mission without making a direct financial contribution:

1. Follow us on social media and help us spread the word about the foundation by liking and sharing our posts. (Find us on Facebook at facebook.com/armororg and on Twitter at twitter.com/armororg.)
2. Volunteer to represent us in your region. We need LEOs and others in every state who are willing to help us build awareness about this issue and organize local fundraisers.
3. Help us find agencies that need our help. If you know of an agency or agencies in your area that are having trouble getting vests on their officers due to financial constraints, direct them to americanarmor.org/agencies/.



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We have discovered over the past 12 months since our founding that one of our most difficult challenges will be letting agencies in need know that we are here to help them. We've reached out to chiefs and sheriffs associations in all 50 states and only a small handful of them were willing to help us spread the word to their membership. We have

received a few applications from that outreach and some of them meet our criteria, but there are hundreds of agencies across the U.S. that need our help and know nothing about us. That being said, outside of fundraising that enables us to actually buy vests, this kind of grassroots communication within the law enforcement community is our biggest need.

Learn more about the American Armor Foundation on our website at americanarmor.org. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Perkins has served as chief of police in a metro Atlanta police department since 2007. Prior to being appointed to his current position, he served in various other capacities, including patrol officer, field training officer, instructor, departmental training officer, shift supervisor, public information officer and certification manager. He was also appointed to the role of interim city manager for his current jurisdiction for an 11-month period between 2011 and 2012. He can be reached at brandon@americanarmor.org or 678-300-3356.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2010/08/31.html>
2. <http://www.12newsnow.com/story/11937772/officers-fight-crime-without-a-lifeline>
3. <http://www.fox7austin.com/fox-7-special-archive/crimewatch/27671114-story>



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