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Belmont Night Out event draws big crowd Tuesday



By JIM CLARK

BELMONT – A big crowd turned out Tuesday for the annual "Belmont Night Out" event held in the parking lot in front of Belmont Mill on Mill Street.

"Belmont Night Out" brought together town citizens with officers of the local police department and fire

department personnel. It offered the chance for residents to meet local emergency first responders, share ideas about community safety efforts and in general directly get to know those men and women who serve the town in a police and firefighting capacity.

The Belmont get-together was part of "National Night Out" events held on Tuesday in small towns, as well as small and large cities all across the country.

The Belmont event was organized by Police Sgt. Adam Hawkins and Police Officer Evan Boulanger, working in collaboration with town government departments, civic organizations and local businesses.

Parked at the scene was the Belknap County Regional Police Special Operations Team van, a command unit used by a SWAT team in emergency situations.

The Belknap County Regional Police Special Operations Team consists of between 18 and 24 on-duty police officers from departments all across Belknap County. It has been in existence since 2003. The commander of the SWAT team is Belknap County Sheriff Craig Wiggin. The number two man is Sheriff's Lt. David Perkins, recently named as the department's chief special deputy.

Hawkins has been part of the SWAT team for the past 10 years — first as an operator, then as assistant team leader, and now he is involved in technical command. He said that the SWAT team is usually called out between 10 and 15 times a year in highly sensitive and dangerous situations which could result in death. Hawkins said these situations normally involve someone who is suspected of committing a crime, who is armed and then who has barricaded himself in a residence and is threatening to shoot himself or others.

Hawkins said a "threat matrix" has been established to determine the severity of a threat. If the threat meets a certain level or threshold, then the armed SWAT team is activated. Response time to the scene after the initial call to police is usually within an hour or less.

Inside the Belknap County Regional Police Special Operations Team van answering questions was Joe McDowell, who has just retired as the police chief of Barnstead. Before that, he was an officer with the Pelham Police Department. McDowell has completed 24 years of full-time law enforcement service, and soon will begin part-time duties, 30 hours a week, as the Belmont Police Department's school resource officer.

He'll be involved directly with high school, middle school and elementary school students, teaching them about the role of police in the community and how law enforcement works. He'll also teach classes in driver education and emergency management.

The Belmont Fire Department conducted a vehicle extrication demonstration in which rescue personnel tore apart an old Ford Taurus vehicle using various tools including the "Jaws of Life." The demonstration showed what would be done in a traffic accident when a driver and/or passengers are trapped inside a vehicle.

Old vehicles used for training by the Belmont Fire Department are supplied by David Rogers of Belmont

Salvage. His father was a fireman for 28 years in Waltham, Mass., and who established Belmont Salvage after retiring.

"Belmont Night Out" also included a K-9 demonstration with the police K-9 unit, child safety seat checks, a healthy living demonstration and a tour of emergency vehicles. Children received free police and fire department stickers and plastic fire helmets.

The Belmont Rotary Club prepared free hot dogs, along with chips and soda, and by 6 p.m., over 200 hot dogs had been passed out. Free ice cream was provided by Granite State Dairy Promotion. Games and face painting were provided by the town's Parks and Recreation Department, and DJ Steve Ainsworth of Equinox Entertainment spinned oldies from the nearby town bandstand.

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