

GASP Concept Expands Nationally

Alabama officials in Akron for training

By Kathleen Folkerth
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DOWNTOWN AKRON — Akron-based Grandparents Against Sex Predators (GASP) is becoming a national organization with the founding of its first affiliate.

Alabama's Jefferson County, which includes the city of Birmingham, is in the process of establishing a chapter of the volunteer organization. Capt. Cleveland Moore and Wanda Jones Miller, both of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, were in Akron this week to meet with GASP members and local officials for an overview of how the organization works.

Moore, who grew up in Akron but has been an Alabama resident for 30 years, said Jefferson County Sheriff Mike Hale heard about GASP at a national conference last year.

"He thought it was the greatest thing since apple pie," Moore said.

Once Moore looked into the program, which relies on older adults and others to assist law enforcement in the case of abductions or other crimes, he also was impressed.

"I became very excited, so the sheriff decided it was time to send us up here and get this project off the ground in our city," Moore said.

Miller, who works in the Victim Assistance Unit, said she will begin to get the Alabama group in place once she returns.

"This will bring a whole new group of people into the sheriff's department to assist us when a child is missing," she said. "And there are other factors we can use these volunteers for."

The two spent Jan. 26 with GASP founder Fran Doll, a Fairlawn resident, in a training session at Superior Staffing in Quaker Square. Joined by GASP President Eva Torocsik, other board members and volunteers, Doll shared information on how the group has been trained and what activities members have helped with since its inception in 2006.

Doll, who began the group after she was distressed at the abduction and murder of Jessica Lunsford in Florida several years ago, said seeing the organization grow is "unbelievable."

"It's so exciting," she said.

During Monday's daylong event, attendees heard from Bill Holland, an inspector in the Summit County Sheriff's Office, who has conducted training for GASP members.

Holland shared how beneficial the group has been, especially in situations such as the Jessie Davis case. Davis had been missing from her Stark County home, and Holland said about 1,200 volunteers came out for a widely publicized search in June 2007.



Wanda Jones Miller and Capt. Cleveland Moore, of Alabama's Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, listen to a discussion on training of volunteers for Grandparents Against Sex Predators.



Fran Doll, a Fairlawn resident and founder of Grandparents Against Sex Predators, displays the vests worn by volunteers that patrolled area streets during Halloween trick-or-treating.



Bill Holland, an inspector in the Summit County Sheriff's Office, explains the training he organized for GASP volunteers last year.

Photos by: Ken Crisafi

“Volunteers can be a blessing, but also a problem as well,” Holland said. “When they show up, what do you know about them?”

The GASP volunteers were helpful because they had already been given background checks and had some training, he said.

Holland added that GASP is ready to work alongside the Child Abduction Response Team (CART), which is made up of 95 law enforcement officials in Summit County.

“That basically doubled our personnel,” he said.

GASP volunteers are valuable for more than the rare incident of an abduction, Holland said. He noted that volunteers have gone into the community to fingerprint children. Volunteers also are taking on the task of scanning documents related to the county’s hundreds of registered sex offenders to make it easier for law enforcement to keep track of their whereabouts, Holland said.

Members also fanned out around The University of Akron campus last year when several young women were raped in their homes in that area. The volunteers hung safety information on doors in cold, snowy weather.

“They were real troopers,” Holland said.

Moore and Miller asked several questions during Holland’s presentation, mostly about the kind of training GASP volunteers have received. Holland said he has conducted two different mock abduction exercises, one that had volunteers show up at a park and learn how to search for evidence.

Holland said if the CART team is called out for a situation, GASP volunteers also will be called.

“I hope we never have to deploy any of these teams, but if the time comes, we’re definitely ready,” he said.

Doll said she hopes to see the GASP concept continue to grow. A meeting will take place Feb. 10 at the Summit County Sheriff’s Training Center in Green to explain GASP to other Ohio sheriffs, she said.

For more information on GASP in Summit County, call (330) 247-1402 or go to www.gasp123.org.