



Up Close and Personal:

citizen academies are giving Alaskans a chance to participate in Public Safety.

Story by: Megan Peters

Saturday, January 26, 2014, was something of a rarity in Palmer, Alaska. It's January and during the morning hours the temperature quickly went from freezing to pushing 50 degrees. The sun was shining and the roads were clear and dry. It was the kind of day that snaps some Alaskans out of their winter gloom and beckons them to go out and soak up the sun. However, instead of stepping out into the sunny day for some outdoor R&R, some two dozen people sat in a conference room. It was the second Saturday class for the Alaska State Trooper Citizen Academy that they signed up for.

Front and center on the class agenda for the day was a topic that is a daily reality in Alaska: search and rescue operations. In 2012, Department of Public Safety personnel spent 4,202 hours investigating reports of 608 potential search and rescues. Not only did AST talk about its role in search

and rescues, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Alaska Air Guard and Mat-SAR got to explain how they are involved as well.

"I was sick so I had to miss that one," said Vicki Wallner, a participant in the current Alaska State Troopers Citizen Academy. "I wanted to go to it, too."

Wallner is no stranger to law enforcement. Her father was a cop and she has been married to an Alaska State Trooper for 15 years. She is also the creator of the "Stop Valley Thieves" Facebook page.

If you already have a pretty positive point of view on law enforcement, then why participate in the citizens academy? Wallner says it helps her not only to better understand her husband's job but it also lets her be an advocate. There are some people, she says, that won't ever like troopers (hard to believe, we know). But if they understand, they don't get so worked up.



An AST pilot gave a brief lesson on the department's newest air asset to the citizen academy participants out in Palmer, Alaska. DPS acquired the ASTAR in January. The helo will be based out of Anchorage, Alaska. The other ASTAR helicopter is now based out of Fairbanks, Alaska. Both helicopters will be used for search and rescue operations, among other tasks.



At academies, participants take field trips and are even given hands on lessons, to include a day at the shooting range with close oversight and strict instructions for various firearms utilized by troopers.



The Alaska State Troopers' Special Emergency Response Team make an appearance to citizen academies to give participants an opportunity to see what a tactical response looks like as well as allow them the opportunity to try on SERT member's gear. During a call out, SERT members can wear gear that weighs up to 60 pounds.

“Because of the Facebook page, I get asked a lot of questions,” Wallner said. “A lot of people don’t understand what troopers are up against. The more I can explain to them, in regards to the population ratios and shifts, etc., they start calming down a lot. I have some people who get on the Facebook page and they are mad wanting to know why troopers weren’t dusting for finger prints after their TV was stolen or something. I have seen attitudes change for the better because we can talk about it.”

Wallner recommends that people take advantage of the free citizen academies when classes are available. She says it lets her be a better, more informed member of the community. She is learning about dispatch, firearms, the role the Department of Corrections plays in law enforcement and domestic violence.

Citizens academies, in general, bring citizens and troopers together in a learning environment. Ideas are exchanged, misperceptions corrected, and both groups can learn from the other in terms of realistic expectations. During the academy, participants also get to go on a ride-a-long with a trooper, hear from local law enforcement agencies and partners, and take tours of the law enforcement facilities, like the dispatch center or police department. If nothing else, citizens walk away from the classes with a clearer understanding of the role of AST and what we do for them.

The Alaska State Trooper Citizen Academy in Palmer is one of two currently underway in Alaska. Troopers have a score of people on the Kenai Peninsula going through the same class. Troopers in Fairbanks are currently accepting applications for its Citizen Academy which starts in March.

The citizen academy, Wallner says, is about being a part of the solution and knowing what information law enforcement needs from the public to safely respond to incidents. “If there is domestic violence going on in your neighborhood, then it is your business,” Wallner firmly stated.



For more information on Alaska State Troopers Citizen Academies, go to: <http://dps.alaska.gov/PIO/citizenacademy.aspx>