

Sheriff departments in Franklin, Somerset counties to back each other up

Sheriffs' deputies and administrators now have enforcement powers in both spread-out, rural counties.

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Ten officers each from Somerset County and Franklin County sheriff offices took part in a double swearing-in ceremony at the Somerset County Sheriff's Office in East Madison on Thursday. *Staff photo by David Leaming*

EAST MADISON — When Somerset County Sheriff's Deputy David A. Cole was shot at by a woman with a handgun in New Portland in March, he could have used quick backup from deputies in nearby Franklin County.

Cole, who was not injured, tackled the woman without another shot being fired. But the encounter could have been deadly for Cole, who was caught out in the open.

While New Portland is close to the border with Franklin County, next-door deputies did not have police powers in Somerset County.

All that changed Thursday when 24 sheriff's deputies and administrators from both departments were sworn in as full-time officers in both counties, giving them pursuit and arrest powers in rural areas where county lines blur and dark roads twist in and out of jurisdictions.

Franklin County deputies were sworn in as Somerset deputies and Somerset County deputies were sworn in as Franklin deputies.

"I think it's wonderful — it should have happened years ago," Somerset County Sheriff Barry DeLong said. "Back along, everyone was going in different directions. Every sheriff had his own turf. Most departments didn't have an interest and some (county) commissioners weren't interested."

DeLong said under the new agreement there is no additional liability for police response and no increase in spending for taxpayers. Only full-time, criminal justice academy certified officers were sworn in. The cross-deputization is for three years.

Franklin County Sheriff Scott Nichols said some towns, such as Farmington and Wilton, have mutual aid agreements, much like fire departments have, but nothing as comprehensive as what is being done with the sheriff departments in Franklin and Somerset counties.

Kennebec County Sheriff Randall Liberty, president of the Maine Sheriffs Association, said his department deputizes about 40 police officers from surrounding cities and towns for purposes of the underage drinking task force or counter-drug efforts, as do other agencies on an individual basis. He said collaborative efforts, such as Waterville police wanting to do some work generally in northern Kennebec County or Augusta or Gardiner police wanting to investigate something in another town, are not uncommon.

Liberty said legislation was passed last year allowing memorandums of understanding for counties to work with one another. He said there also is some cross-deputization between counties, but nothing as all-inclusive as the agreement between Somerset and Franklin counties.

“I think this is probably pretty unique to do both full agencies back and forth that way,” Liberty said. “I think that approach is a great way to deliver a great service to both counties. I think it makes good sense.”

Nichols agreed, noting that there are back-country roads that zig-zag in and out of the two counties over a wide area.

“What this does is provides an enhanced level of response and coverage — it shares resources for both departments,” Nichols said. “Franklin County and Somerset County kind of interweave like fingers — Starks, New Portland, Kingfield, New Vineyard — there’s about eight miles on Route 27 that our guys are on there all the time with just regular routine things. If they happen to see some sort of violation, in the past they haven’t been able to take care of it. But now they’ll have the authority to pull that vehicle over and be able to do some drug interdiction.”

Dale Lancaster, chief deputy at the Somerset County Sheriff’s Department, said a similar joint agreement is being discussed for implementation statewide by the Maine Sheriff’s Association. He said there is a trend among sheriff departments in Maine toward joint coverage, especially in large counties such as Franklin and Somerset.

“There are approximately 380-plus deputies in the state of Maine — we all have special skills, investigative skills, accident reconstruction skills,” Lancaster said. “Although there will still be a level of duplication, it’s really a force multiplier because we can use each other’s resources to enhance our operations. We can now reach out to Franklin and ask for their assistance and know that we’re covered. We can better serve the citizens of both counties.”