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Public housing beefs up patrols

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MILLVILLE — The Millville Housing Authority and the police department have formed a new partnership to use on-duty officers to cut down on crime at public housing

complexes.

Beginning in a few weeks, officers will add routine patrols at three MHA properties and meet regularly with the staff to discuss any problems. The City Commission approved the agreement at the Sept. 16 meeting. The authority will pay the department

\$25,000 a year to patrol complexes and assist the authority on its investigations.

The agreement calls for routine foot patrols at RiverView West, RiverView East and the Jaycee Plaza.

Officers will have to notify the authority's Lease Enforcement Officer

John Mazzeo of any police activity at MHA sites and meet regularly with MHA staff to update the authority on its patrols.

Over the past few years, the MHA had contracted off-duty officers for security needs. But this agree-

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ment is different because the officers on the patrols will be on-duty as they are available, Public Safety Director Dave Vanaman said.

The agreement "is to their advantage and our advantage," he said.

Vanaman said it's possible similar agreements could be reached with other entities in the future. The police would not patrol the MHA sites if they are needed at other locations, he said.

The arrangement came at an opportune time for the city as they considered layoffs of eight police officers and one dispatcher this year due to budget cuts. The city ultimately reached a deal in which all Public Safety employees agreed to take eight furlough days.

Vice Mayor Joe Derella said the department used the \$25,000 to help fill gaps in the department's budget.

MHA Executive Director Paul Dice said he found interest in the agreement a few months ago because it is cheaper than the authority hiring its own staff or an outside company and it helps the city earn extra

money.

"We offered this at a time where the police were wrestling with reductions in the work force," he said. "We have a vested interest in helping the department and we wanted to be part of the solution."

Dice declined to say how often the police would do patrols.

Capt. Wayne Smith said police do patrols between calls, but they don't have as much time, due to a shortage of staff and the furlough days. The department has about a half-dozen open positions.

Smith said the money would help, but noted it's not enough to pay for a full position.

Mazzeo has worked with the authority since February and said he has 74 investigations regarding tenants. The incidents include thefts, frauds, and instances of disorderly conduct and trespassing. Mazzeo, who has one staff member working under him, also monitors surveillance cameras at the properties.

"Investigations are very time intensive. This is a very different approach and a far more effective approach than what's been done to date," he said. "Now we share intelligence. That is the best possible tool we can have in investiga-

tions."

Mazzeo said most of the incidents occur at Holly Berry Court, a complex on Holly Berry Lane that off-duty officers used to patrol. Dice said he did not want patrols at that site as of now. The MHA recently moved its offices to that complex.

"What we're doing here is working," he said of Holly Berry Court.

Staff Writer Alex Harcharek contributed to this story.