

Taking a Bite Out of Valley Crime

The Mat-Su Valley's Criminal Suppression Unit has been running full throttle since its inception at the beginning of 2014. The unit was formed two years ago to focus on time-intensive property crimes and the serial criminals who commit them. Since many of the perpetrators have each racked up a bevy of misdeeds, taking one off the streets makes a noticeable dent in crime in the Valley. In its first year alone, the endeavor produced a 38 percent reduction in the number of burglaries and a 39 percent reduction in the number of thefts in the Mat-Su Valley. This also resulted in the recovery of approximately \$300,550 worth of stolen goods, to include 44 firearms; 12 ATVs and snowmachines; and five cars and trucks. That, as unit leader Sgt. Tony Wegrzyn said, is the true measure of success for the team that over time has included fellow B Detachment troopers Timothy Cronin, Andrew Ballesteros, Eric Taylor, Ron Hayes and Charles Withers.

"It's really nice when we can catch the guy, but it's really nice when we can return the stolen stuff to people," he said.

The unit is gaining even more ground its second year. As of Dec. 11, the unit took on 34 theft-related investigations and was responsible for recovering \$295,720 worth of stolen goods including 10 cars and trucks; 23 snowmachines, ATVs and trailers; one river boat and five boat motors; and 57 stolen guns. Fifty-two of those firearms were from a theft ring involving four defendants suspected of committing six burglaries. Some of the cases took the unit outside AST's



From left to right, Trooper Eric Taylor, Trooper Timothy Cronin, Sgt. Tony Wegrzyn and Trooper Andrew Ballesteros made up the B Detachment's Crime Suppression Unit that received the [2015 Governor's Denali Peak Performance Award](#) in the exceptional performance team category for their work in combating property crimes in Southcentral Alaska. Wegrzyn was also awarded Division of Trooper of the Year

typical jurisdiction. One successful case involved a man who was stealing boat motors from people living in an area reaching from Houston to South Anchorage. Another involved nine people connected to the theft of copper wire and steel from the Eklutna Salmon Hatchery. One of the defendants was linked to other thefts in the Valley. CSU also garnered 21 arrest warrants – and the year isn't even over. This unit was responsible for the recovery of an additional four automobiles and three stolen guns since the recent tally.

CSU's accomplishments have garnered some attention outside the department. The unit's original members, Wegrzyn, Ballesteros, Cronin and Taylor, received the 2015 Governor's Denali Peak Performance Award in the exceptional performance team category. After Ballesteros and Taylor moved on to other assignments this year, Hayes and Withers joined the team and hit the ground running.

Wegrzyn's eyes light up when he talks about how he and "his boys" work a

variety of "really great, big cases."

"I don't want anybody to know how much I love it or they'll yank the rug out from under me," he joked. It's this gusto that was a big reason why Wegrzyn was named 2014 Alaska State Troopers Division Trooper of the Year. Ballesteros and Taylor were also each honored in 2014 with Commendation Awards for their mentoring and hard work that included helping Matanuska Valley Electric develop system of reporting crime to law enforcement.

Alaska Wildlife Tails



Click here to read about Alaska Wildlife Troopers Division Trooper of the Year, Trooper Tim Hall, on the Alaska Wildlife Tails blog.

“I push my guys hard. I’m a very demanding person,” Wegrzyn admits. “I expect a lot from my guys.”

The unit is his creation. He crafted a memo with the idea and put it on B Detachment Commander Capt. Hans Brinke’s desk in 2013. Then Wegrzyn hand selected his troopers. When he started the process of tackling the Valley’s growing larceny problem, Wegrzyn sent out an email looking for troopers passionate about battling property crimes. Out of the eight or nine responses, he selected three with a variety of different years as troopers – Ballesteros with 12-1/2, Cronin with six and Taylor with two.

Brinke said not only has the unit been successful in solving crimes, but supporting and mentoring other Valley troopers. They’ve become the go-to guys when others are learning the ropes of investigating property crimes or when someone is looking for information on particular people or activity.

“They’re developing skills that they’re passing on to other troopers,” Brinke said. “They know everybody in the Valley.”

They’re also taking the burden off of patrol troopers who have to prioritize crimes against people such as domestic violence cases over property crimes.

One of the biggest strengths is the unit’s flexibility to get the job done. They will work patrol one day and then the next day dress down, use an unmarked forfeited vehicle belonging to the Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit and work on property crime rings.

“We work weird hours, we do weird things,” Wegrzyn said. “We drive marked cars, we drive unmarked cars. We wear a uniform and sometimes we don’t wear a uniform. We work days, graves or swings. We go where the work is.”

In a typical case, once a suspect is identified, the team will divvy up different aspects of the investigation and work on tying up the loose ends, narrowing the case to that particular person and compiling evidence to prove the suspect did the crime.

“That’s about it,” Wegrzyn said. “The rest is good cop work.”

Wegrzyn called Ballesteros his digger. “He would dig and dig and dig. He would

For the past two years, both divisions’ trooper of the year honors have come with a ring. Click on the certificate below to read the letter that accompanied Wegrzyn’s award.



never stop until he found what he was looking for or we just determined we had to go a different route,” Wegrzyn said. Ballesteros is now doing his digging with the Statewide Drug Enforcement Unit.

Meanwhile, he calls Cronin his high drive, get-it-done-immediately trooper who likes to keep busy. “When I need something done and it needs to get done right away, I’ll send him.”

Taylor fell somewhere in between the two. What made him stand out when Wegrzyn was looking to form his team was Taylor’s overwhelming passion for fighting property crimes. “He didn’t have a ton of experience on, but he has this – ‘capslock, underline’ – PASSION for finding stolen stuff and getting that back to its rightful owner. You can’t teach that.” Taylor is now working as a patrol trooper in the Fairbanks area.

Hayes has almost 20 years of police work under his belt and brought his experience and success working in ABI’s burglary suppression unit when he joined the team on Sept. 1.

“He’s Ron Hayes. He’s kind of a big deal,” Wegrzyn said.

Meanwhile Withers, who made the move from Anchorage Airport Police and Fire to AST in 2012, didn’t waste any time getting up to speed after joining the unit on Dec. 1. He broke a string of commercial burglaries by discovering the same characteristics between six AST and one Wasilla Police Department cases.

“He put it all together and did all the heavy lifting on it,” Wegrzyn said. On Dec. 15, a 20-year-old Wasilla man was arrested in connection with these burglaries.

“And me, I’m just kind of a nice guy,” Wegrzyn joked. “I’m the personality. I’m the pretty face.”

~By Beth Ipsen, Public Information Office (elizabeth.ipsen@alaska.gov)