



THE FIX IS IN

Roadside assists can help win public gratitude and support recruitment and retention

By Walt Brinker

As sheriffs, you have three persistent challenges: (1) Winning the hearts and minds of the public; (2) Recruiting deputies; and (3) Retaining deputies. The following suggestion could represent at least a partial solution for all three.

I suggest allowing in-service deputies to perform safe, simple, quick roadside assists to motorists when time permits and there aren't any 911 calls or other top-priority

tasks. By "simple," I mean assists when tires fail or drivers run out of gas; other types of assists might not only expose you to risks for claims of vehicle damage, but also require special skills and inordinate amounts of time.

I myself have provided more than 2,000 roadside assists free of charge in my spare time, so I know what works and what doesn't. Along the way, I have received many heartfelt expressions of gratitude.

Law enforcement officers could garner the same kind of gratitude, winning the hearts and minds of the public as well as greater respect and cooperation.

The personal gratification from doing these assists is immense; that's most of the reason I keep doing them. But many law enforcement agencies have problems with recruiting and retention. Most people join law enforcement because they are service-oriented. Performing occasional

roadside assists can help officers feel better about themselves and help offset the negative aspects of the job, and that, in turn, ought to help retention.

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To capture the lessons I’ve learned from those assists, I wrote the book *Roadside Survival: Low-Tech Solutions to Automobile Breakdowns* to empower everyday drivers to prevent and manage breakdowns. I also recently trained 150 deputies from the Cumberland County (North Carolina) Sheriff’s Office in advanced techniques, and

have since made a 50-minute video that replicates the training.

It costs about \$600 to outfit a vehicle to perform assists. Most items are small, and they may be eligible for Department of Justice (DOJ) grant funding. Sheriff’s offices can start out by equipping only a few vehicles per shift. I’m not in the business of selling such equipment, but you can visit roadsidesurvival.com and look for the “Law Enforcement” page for more information.

A year ago, I met a Grimes County (Texas) deputy who had stopped to help a motorist with a flat tire. The deputy was an experienced guy with the best intentions, but he lacked the knowledge and tools to finish the job. Judging from that example, I’d suggest that many deputies could probably perform assists much more safely and quickly, even if they already do them regularly.

Your office may have a fleet of vehicles dedicated to roadside assists, but sometimes,

having an in-service officer participate is great for PR—even if all he does is loosen some lug nuts. It makes a big impression on the assist recipient, as well as others who witness the assist.

Roadside assists by officers help law enforcement agencies win the hearts and minds of the public, making law enforcement more productive in the long run. If a “carrot and stick” concept can be applied to law enforcement, a roadside assist is one of the carrots—those things citizens appreciate about your force and want to see more often. ★

Walt Brinker is a graduate of West Point, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, a Vietnam veteran, and a retired civilian project manager. He has provided more than 2,000 roadside assists free of charge as a hobby, and offers resources for public agencies wishing to do the same. Email Brinker at walt_brinker@hotmail.com or call (281) 703-2881.

