

Atlantic City police debut mobile observation tower

MOLLY BILINSKI Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — Towering 28 feet above the throngs of bathers near the Park Place beach stands the newest piece of technology city police have added to their department, a mobile surveillance unit.

“It’s what every police officer does every day on the ground,” Deputy Chief James Sarkos said as the SkyWatch tower unfolded and rose upward, stopping at the top with a jolt. The officer sitting inside it can just see more, he said.

A whole lot more, in fact — Sarkos said it might take 10 officers on the ground to cover the same viewing area.

The white tower, complete with tinted windows on each of the four sides of the cabin and seven surveillance cameras attached to its roof, debuted at the Sam Hunt beach concert July 1 and will stand at Thursday’s Demi Lovato concert, acting as a visual deterrent for those thinking about committing a crime and a resource for spotting crime as it happens.

“The special events always concern us,” Sarkos said, adding the tower is just another tool in the department’s box. “We’re always making sure people are as safe as they can be.”

Howard Schemer, sales director for SkyWatch, said 190 law-enforcement agencies throughout the country, including sheriff’s offices, police departments and highway patrols, have SkyWatch on duty at any given time. In New Jersey, 10 agencies have the mobile surveillance unit, including the Camden Police Department.

Schemer said the two largest applications for the tower are crowd control and parking lot surveillance, but it’s also a deterrent in high-crime areas.

“All the time, we’re told that when SkyWatch goes up, crimes comes down, instantly,” Schemer said.

SkyWatch cost the department \$235,000 but was paid for through an FBI grant, Sarkos said, adding the Police Foundation paid for the Police Department decals that adorn it.

Inside the cabin is a computer monitor that shows all seven camera feeds at once, including two pan-tilt-zoom, three stationary and one thermal camera.

If an officer sees suspicious activity, he or she can radio down to another officer on the ground, who can investigate, he said. The cameras also feed back to the Atlantic City Headquarters for Intelligence Logistics Electronic Surveillance, or ACHILES, Sarkos said, where surveillance officers can monitor them remotely.

Along with the cameras mounted to the roof, there are flood and spot lights, a public address system and a siren. The tower runs on electric power but has the option to run on a diesel generator, complete with a 78-gallon gas tank, to help power the air conditioning and heat.

And it isn’t just for events. The tower can be moved anywhere it needs to be, including neighborhoods and areas of the Boardwalk that are strong enough to hold it.

“When people look up and they see it, it adds a layer of security,” Sarkos said.

“We want everyone to know that we’re here,” Sarkos said. “That in and of itself provides a layer of protection.”