

Policing terror



Los Angeles Airport police officer Alphonso Lagos with explosives detection dog 'Spikey', part of the new Department of Homeland Security.

Credit: Empics

As UK police forces push for the resources needed to deal with the threat of terrorism, Peter Riley reports on how the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has responded since September 11, 2001.

There can hardly be anyone in the world who is allowed to forget the horrendous events of September 11, 2001, when the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC were attacked by terrorists, leaving more than 3,000 innocent people killed.

That sinister event set off a chain reaction within the USA; a reaction of panic coupled with determination. At the forefront of the response to Al-Qaeda, the main terrorist group blamed for the US attacks, are thousands of

American police and other law enforcement agencies. They have set to work with a mission to destroy terrorism within their country and to build intelligence levels to a peak where they know, or at least suspect, what is going on in their own backyard.

The Los Angeles experience

One such law enforcement agency that has been forced to look at its resources and response to the terror threat is the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in California. With 8,028 sworn personnel and 4,377

civilian employees, it is the largest Sheriff's Department in the United States, and with a population of 2,557,754 in the county covering 3,171 square miles, it is no easy task to maintain day to day law and order and look into terror problems at the same time.

That is why, on October 27, 2002, the Sheriff of Los Angeles County, Leroy D. Baca, established the Homeland Security Division, making it one of 10 divisions within the department. At the head of the Homeland Security Division he placed Sandra Hutchens, who, with the rank of

Chief, is entrusted in making Los Angeles as free from terror attacks as it is possible to be, working hand in hand with other agencies such as the FBI and the Secret Service when necessary.

Chf Hutchens started her career with the Sheriff's Department back in the heady days of 1976, when such things as terrorism only seemed to be happening elsewhere in the world. After graduating from the Training Academy as a Deputy Sheriff she worked at various locations and in several departments throughout the county before being promoted

to sergeant in 1986.

It was a further eight years before she was promoted again, this time to Lieutenant, where she became a Watch Commander. In July 1999 she was promoted to Captain.

During her years with the Sheriff's Department she also took time to earn herself a Bachelor of Arts degree in Public Administration and also graduated from the FBI National Academy. She taught in the LA Sheriff's Training Bureau, thus giving her a wide remit of work within the Department.

Although Chf Hutchens will not reveal the extent or details of the work carried out by the Homeland Security Division, beyond that which is already in the public domain, there is little doubt that she has a determination to succeed in the task set out by Sheriff Baca and President George W. Bush, to rid the country of terrorists.

'The attack upon our country clearly demonstrated that emergency personnel, first on the scene, can make a significant contribution in the rescue of severely injured victims and the restoration of public order. In this instance 'first responders' from local government entities were the only public safety personnel on scene for several hours.

'Should an incident or disaster of this magnitude occur in our county, many of the first responders will be the men and women of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's department,' she says.

The role of Sheriff

Leroy D. Baca, is LA County's 30th Sheriff since the post was established in the Wild West days of 1850. In those times, as far removed as it possible to be from today's operational role, the job was offered for a period of only one year, being increased in 1882 to two years and to four years in 1894. The first Sheriff was George T. Burrill who had a staff of just two deputies.

Baca was born in East Los Angeles in 1942 and after graduating from High School he worked in a variety of jobs before enrolling in the United States



Marine Corps Reserves. In 1965 he started his public career by joining the LA County Sheriff's Department as a Deputy Sheriff Trainee. Over the years he worked his way through the ranks and in 1992 he was promoted to Chief by the then Sheriff, Sherman Block.

In the following year Baca, who had been studying in his spare time, graduated from the University of Southern California with a Doctorate in Public Administration. It was a useful barometer for future achievements, and in 1994 he directed a strategy that incorporated the office of the Sheriff with the other old Wild West office of Marshal, thus saving the county's taxpayers a hefty 14 million dollars a year. For this effort Baca was awarded a Distinguished Service Award.

He became Sheriff of LA County in December 1998, and is a strong believer in integrating himself within numerous public roles, including the unusual role of being a Professor of Public Administration at the University of La Verne in California.

Sheriff Baca says: 'We all witnessed the horrific attack upon America perpetrated by terrorists who had taken up residence in the United States. We were truly shocked and saddened at the tragic loss of thousands of innocent lives and the billions of dollars in property loss. The fact that terrorists could successfully target two of our country's major commercial and government centres with such impunity was a clear indication that drastic action had

to be taken to insure the integrity of our country's Homeland Security.

'Therefore we are embarking on a proactive effort to enhance our Department's response to potential threats related to local homeland security. This has been accomplished by designating a special office to command those bureaus and units within our Department that have a nexus to local homeland security.

'The members of this office are committed to the pursuit of a co-ordinated strategy of preparedness to ensure the readiness of our first responders who are ultimately entrusted with the mission of protecting all the citizens of our county.'

Extra funding

Since 2001 the United States Government has tripled federal funding for homeland security to a massive and unprecedented 30.5 billion dollars.

President Bush said recently: We will stay on the offensive. We will not relent. And as we wage this war abroad, we must remember where it began, here in our homeland.

'We've undertaken the most sweeping reorganisation of the federal government since the beginning of the Cold War. The FBI has transformed itself into an agency dedicated primarily to the prevention of future terrorist attacks. The Department of Defence has established a new top level command whose priority is to protect the American homeland.

'We'll do everything we can to prevent attacks on America. As we do so, we'll reduce our vulnerabilities and prepare for any attack that might come; that's our duty; that's our collective mission.'

The president's words, backed by some of the billions awarded to State, County and city officials, have been taken on board by LA County Sheriff's Department personnel, and Sheriff Baca has also been instrumental in establishing CERT, otherwise known as Community Emergency Response Team Training, that was first mooted back in 1985 by the Los Angeles Fire Department in the wake of fears that California would suffer a major earthquake and subsequent serious fires.

As the chief law-enforcer for Los Angeles County, Sheriff Baca decided to take this measure and put into practice a training programme that would allow local people to work alongside police, fire fighters and other civil authorities in the pursuit of maintaining a high level of preparedness in the event of a major terrorist attack in Los Angeles County.

It is almost identical to a scheme implemented in Britain during the height of the Second World War, and includes training in disaster preparation, fire safety, disaster medical operations, search and rescue, team organisation, disaster psychology and others leading up to 21 hours of over-all training.

A spokesman for the programme commented: 'The CERT course will benefit any citizen who takes it. This individual will be better prepared to respond to and cope with the aftermath of a disaster. Additionally, if a community wants to supplement its response capacity after a disaster, civilians can be recruited and trained as neighbourhood, business and government teams that, in essence, will be auxiliary responders. These groups can provide immediate assistance to victims in their area, organise spontaneous volunteers who have not had the training, and collect disaster intelligence that will assist professional responders with prioritisation of resources following a disaster.'

