

Posse members received an Official Commendation from Sheriff Lillard for their work during the COVID pandemic. l to r Dan Hiebert, Paul Gottlieb, Dan McEleney, Chris Depuy, Mark Rackay, Dave Hibl, Don Bertorello, Lewis Wengerd and Jack Lee. (Courtesy photos/Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse)



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From COVID vaccine clinics to parades — and backcountry rescues — the Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse has citizens covered.

In 2021, the all-volunteer organization, with West End and East End divisions, contributed roughly 4,000 hours of work to their friends and neighbors, including security at a three-month-long vaccine clinic last January — March.

On top of that commitment came eight or nine search and rescue missions last year, some ending quickly with the best results and others, as tragic recoveries.

Last June, the posse responded within minutes of receiving a call for help at the Black Canyon; members quickly located a diabetic woman who had become disoriented after her vehicle went off the road.

Sadly, in October, the posse and sheriff's office could only help retrieve the body of an out-of-state hunter who collapsed and died of an

**Honors for posse members
Among those honored at the Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse annual banquet Jan. 8 were:**

- West End Member of the Year, Melinda Riley
- East End Member of the Year, Charles Garretson
- Life Saving Award: Don Bertorello

The Member of the Year Award is given by the president of each posse division to the person who has advanced the most, or who has performed extraordinarily well during the year. Riley and Garretson each received personalized belt buckles.

Bertorello was honored with the Life Saving Award for halting a personal camping trip when another person approached his camp on the Cimarron, seeking help for an ill friend. Bertorello administered first aid until ambulance crews could arrive, saving the ill woman's life, posse officer Paul Gottlieb said.

"He was off-duty. He had his radio with him. He called in the ambulance. he was just about ready to sit down for dinner and he spend a couple of hours performing first aid until the ambulance got there. He could have sent her (woman's friend) on her way to get someone else, but he's very dedicated and highly trained," Gottlieb said.

"Many of these guys, if they're on personal time, they see an incident and they did right in and do what they're supposed to

apparent heart ailment.

"We're going out hoping it's a rescue, but many times, it's a recovery," said Mark Rackay, director of the posse. Rackay is also a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press. "You have to have the right people that are prepared for both outcomes and able to handle both outcomes."

It's worth reiterating that all of this work — the hard slog through all terrain, all conditions; the

training; the logistics of traffic control; security, and, as Rackay alluded to, the emotional toll — comes to the county at no charge.

Operational costs, however, are not free. The posse relies on donations solicited each year by letter. The letter, which is the only official fundraiser for the posse, is being sent out Monday, Jan. 17.

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Posse members assisting with the recovery of a deceased person off High Mesa. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse)



Evan Beachy and Dave Hibl, posse members, assist the Montrose County Coroner's Office with the recovery of a deceased man. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse)



Posse helping load up an injured hiker onto CareFlight off 25 Mesa Road. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse)



Posse member Dave Fowler receives a Unit Citation from Sheriff Gene Lillard. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff's Office Posse)



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Sheriff's posse dedicated to citizens

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“That is the only thing we do all year long. We don’t call anybody. We don’t go door-to-door. We send this letter once a year and say ‘help us if you can,’” said Rackay.

Posse needs are growing. One of the more pressing ones is for a vehicle that can traverse deep snow.

Rackay said that need was driven home on Jan. 2, when a plane crash-landed in remote Montrose County. The pilot survived, but getting to him took some work, because the posse’s vehicles could only go so far before getting mired down.

“We’re probably looking at having to save our pennies and see if we can come up with some snowmobiles and a sled (for injured or incapacitated parties). We’re going to need multiple snow machines. You need a crew. We’re not sure how to handle that or what we’re going to do at this point,” said Rackay, who added Sheriff Gene Lillard will be reaching out to grant writers.

“We’ve got to up our game in the winter. At that plane crash, there was 6 to 7 feet of snow on the ground,” Rackay said.

“We’re definitely going to need snow machines,” said posse member Don Bertorello. “It’s not something we use all the time, but definitely something we can use, for sure.”

He explained posse members could only proceed about 3 miles off the pavement in responding to the Jan. 2 crash,

Missed your letter? Here’s how to donate

- Donations (accepted year-round) may be mailed to the Montrose County Sheriff’s Office Posse at 1020 N. Grand Ave., Montrose, CO 81401.
- Information about donating or volunteering: info@mcspi.org or 970-252-4033. Website: www.mcspi.org.

because of the snow and conditions. They then had to wait for snow machines to come in.

Rackay does not expect the annual fundraising drive to cover costs of that magnitude, but said contributions will help cover the posse’s overhead expenses.

Normally, the donation drive generates enough to pay for operational costs of servicing equipment, insurance and building expenses. Like everything else, however, those expenses are increasing, Rackay also said.

“We can’t do this without the public. We can’t possibly do this without the help of the community,” he said.

“They’ve been phenomenal. We want to be sure to really thank you for those,” said Bertorello. “Those donations have allowed us to purchase very needed and (replace) outdated equipment.”

The chance to serve the community through the posse after retiring from law enforcement speaks to Bertorello, who was recently honored with a Life Saving Award for assisting a woman in medical distress.

“It’s great to be able to

help my community out. I love getting out and helping people, doing search and rescue, firefighting, traffic control, or whatever they need,” he said.

That includes auxiliary functions, such as helping with traffic control at events like the annual parade of lights.

“We work in conjunction with the police department. A lot of people don’t know some of us do a lot of (funeral) escorts,” Bertorello said.

“I’m very glad to be an officer on the posse and I look forward to many more years of service.”

The posse’s work hinges on both public and administrative support. Rackay says the organization has found plenty.

“Sheriff Lillard and Undersheriff (George) Jackson, Lts. (Ty) Cox and (Ted) Valerio have been absolutely fabulous in helping us out and training with us. They have been a fantastic support for us. We’ve got some posse members that really stepped up,” he said.

Posse success also depends on members in Montrose and on the West End in the Nucla/Naturita area.

“We couldn’t do this posse without having a West End and an East End. Thanks to our West End guys. The folks there have really done a job for us. The people over there are lucky to have them. They are as dedicated as you’d ever want to see,” Rackay said.

Katharhynn Heidelberg is the Montrose Daily Press assistant editor and senior writer. Follow her on Twitter, @kathMDP.



Posse members working traffic control and security at the COVID vaccination clinic, Friendship Hall. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff’s Office Posse)



Posse members Mark Rackay and Paul Gottlieb assist motocyclists stranded by flooding rain in the adobes. (Courtesy photo/Montrose County Sheriff’s Office Posse)



A plane, visible in a sea of snow, as spotted by CareFlight on Jan. 2. The pilot made an emergency landing west of Montrose as the aircraft went down; he landed upside down in deep snow. The Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse took the coordinates from the CareFlight aircraft and responded to rescue the pilot, who didn’t sustain life-threatening injuries. (Courtesy photo/CareFlight)