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Scranton Police Officer Mike Bryndzia talks with students in the cafeteria at Scranton High School. The city and school district have decided to keep all six of the school resource officers while facing cuts in the program's federal funding.

The beat goes on in halls

Fed funds gone, but school-cop programs go on

BY REID COPLOFF

STAFF WRITER

Six roam the halls in the Scranton School District. One bounces between North Pocono High School and Middle School. In Dunmore High School, you'll see one chatting up the students.

School resource officers were planted in schools nationwide with the help of federal grants.

Although the three-year grants have mostly gone by the wayside, most Lackawanna County school districts have decided keeping officers in schools is worthwhile enough to pay for. The districts have picked up the tab themselves, split it with the municipality or had the department pay for the officer.

"We found (having the officer) to be very effective," said Carbondale Area School District Superintendent Dominic Famularo. "It's something that's well received in the schools."

Since Carbondale's grant expired, the district has been paying for its sole resource officer.

The officers perform a num-

ber of duties, including directing traffic, talking to students and teaching crime-prevention classes.

Having officers in schools opens a line of communication with students and prevents crime, Scranton Police Chief David Elliott said. He should know. During the 2000-01 school year, Chief Elliott was a school resource officer at West Intermediate School.

"I thought it was great," he said. "You got to connect with the kids. They give you a lot of information, and you find out what's going on."

It costs the city about \$50,000 a year in salary and benefits to employ each officer. In 2001, the city received a federal grant to put two officers in the schools for three years, with the city paying for a fourth.

When that federal money dried up, the city reapplied. Except it's not exactly that easy.

"It's not like you pick up the phone and say, 'We'll take it for four more years,'" said city grant writer Tom Bell.

The city was turned down. "It's a reflection on the total funding," Mr. Bell said.

Despite that, the city will keep them on. "The city has worked hard to keep these officers," Chief Elliott said. "Not one of these officers has been terminated."

North Pocono School District faced a similar problem for this school year. The district had two officers initially paid for by a four-year grant that decreased over the years.

Late last year, the School Board decided to eliminate one officer and keep the other, having him patrol both the high school and middle school. "The feedback from my principals is that the kids toe the line more knowing that law enforcement is there," said Superintendent Louis DeFazio, Ed.D.

Although other districts may be decrying a lack of federal funding now, not all districts were lucky enough to receive it in the first place.

Valley View had a different, smaller grant at one point, said Superintendent Joseph Daley. Even without a grant now, Mr. Daley said having the officer is "well worth it."

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Program highlights

■ Since the federal COPS in Schools program began in 1999, the federal government has spent \$753 million to put more than 6,500 resource officers in schools nationwide. More than \$14.5 million has been awarded in Pennsylvania for 122 officers.

■ The grants award a department up to \$125,000 over three years for a full-time officer. Local governments pay for the fourth year.

■ From fiscal year 2004 to fiscal year 2005, funds for the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), which administers the COPS in Schools grants and other programs, were slashed from \$756 million to \$97 million.

■ The COPS program was started in 1994 by President Clinton, in hopes of adding 100,000 officers to ranks of law enforcement. According to its Web site, the program eventually funded 118,000 new positions.

SOURCES: U.S. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), Scranton Police Chief David Elliott