

Drug task force given good marks for first year

By Jeanne Curran
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A recently released evaluation of the Tri-County Cocaine Task Force has concluded that the cooperative agency "enjoyed a very successful first year." The report, compiled by a nine-member evaluation team, also pointed out that despite budget, staff, and equipment problems, "significant inroads were made in drug enforcement in the tri-county area and the task force approach was again validated."

In addition, the team members supported the task force's incorporation into the state's new Bureau of Intergovernmental Drug Enforcement, continued communications with local law-enforcement agencies, the targeting of smaller communities, and improved public relations, including the establishment of a toll-free hotline.

Penobscot County Sheriff Ed Reynolds, chairman of the task force's steering committee, said Monday that he was "absolutely" pleased with the team's findings.

"For the first year, it's more than what I expected," said Reynolds.

"We set out to do a specific job and have seen similar concepts to this fail in the past. I think you could say that this application of the concept is a resounding success."

One of three in the state, the task force began operating in July 1986 after it was initiated by U.S. Attorney Richard Cohen. The seven-member agency consists of officers from the Maine State Police and local and county departments in Penobscot, Hancock, and Piscataquis counties. The task force is funded by municipal, county, and state contributions.

The evaluation team members comprised county and municipal officials and law-enforcement administrators. Reynolds said he thought they were able to conduct a fair evaluation "because there was always a degree of skepticism from municipal and county leaders wondering if we weren't trying to buy a pig in a poke."

He continued, "They really critiqued us to the limit." At times I thought they were going to nitpick us to death. I was very pleased with the results."

Albert T. Jamison, law enforcement coordinator with Cohen's of-

fice, said the evaluation was intended to acquaint the local communities "with what happened with what money was spent and what was achieved, instead of a philosophical evaluation of the system."

The evaluation showed that the task force opened 148 cases, which may have included more than one individual, and brought charges against 95 people. Included in those cases were investigations of three clandestine laboratories allegedly making illegal drugs and 11 conspiracy cases involving the multi-kilo distribution of cocaine. Not all the investigations resulted in prosecution, said Jamison.

Drug purchases were small, with about one pound of cocaine, two pounds of marijuana, and a half pound of hashish purchased, according to the report. The purchases were made as a means to go "higher up into the drug organization," explained Jamison.

The cost of the task force was less than originally estimated, said the coordinator, with the total budget estimated at \$415,700. Expenditures totalled \$268,891, and contributions from the municipalities and counties

totalled \$139,338.

The evaluation team interviewed municipal and county officials, law-enforcement administrators, task force agents, and prosecutors, according to the report. All of them expressed support for the interagency concept and the work done by the task force.

They also expressed concern about the lack of communications between the task force and local political entities and of a "high-visibility operation"; "too little feedback to area departments and 'shoe-string' funding"; and the need for more statewide intelligence and crime history information, for more equipment and better office space, and for better targeting of suspects.

Reynolds said he would like to see the task-force concept used for other types of organized crime, suggesting it could be used on insurance fraud and stolen-car rings. He said he thought the incorporation of the task force under the new state bureau would improve the cooperative agency by streamlining operations and making it more efficient and accountable.

The sheriff said he thought in the future more municipalities would become involved with the task force, "thus giving use a larger task force and allowing us to more freely follow the flow of drugs."

"It will allow us to reach out and touch someone," he said.

Eighth child-abuse defendant goes on trial in Bangor court