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## A lifeline

Divers with Boone County Water Rescue feel their way in the blackness of the Ohio River in search of drowning victims.

They plunge into icy waters to recover evidence for crime investigations.

Squad members help stranded boaters as they patrol some 60 miles of the river from Big Bone Creek on the Ohio River to Locust Pike on weekends.

Trained as emergency medical technicians, they render first aid and pull people from the water.

Just last month, divers from the squad found a gun in a lake that authorities believe was used in a shooting during an attempted robbery of a restaurant in Highland Heights.

Boone County Water Rescue divers combed the frigid Ohio River day in and day out in search of the body of Michael Partin, the Covington police officer who drowned in 1998 after falling from the Clay Wade Bailey Bridge while pursuing a suspect.

And it was the squad's divers who had the heart-wrenching job of pulling 6-year-old Dylan Roberts from the closed Rosedale pool three years ago after the boy climbed the fence securing it and drowned in rainwater that had collected in the pool.

"Until you've walked out of the water carrying a lifeless child, you don't know what our people go through," said squad Capt. Dale Appel.

For 36 years, Boone County Water Rescue has been on the water to provide a high-level of public service in both Boone and Kenton counties. Last year volunteers clocked more than 10,000 man-hours.

But budget constraints could dissolve all of that. Boats and diving equipment are expensive. In a budget that County Administrator Jim Parsons said has required cuts in every department, some county officials question whether the county can continue to put some \$160,000 a year into the squad.

Moreover, county officials note the squad spends much of its time on the water outside of Boone County and yet only receives a total of \$30,000 from Kenton County and the city of Covington for those services. Why should Boone County taxpayers provide the bulk of support for a service largely outside the county?

Additionally, as budgets are tightened everywhere, they ask should the public continue to pay to put boats on patrol or should response to emergencies be a call-out basis?

They are fair questions to raise but difficult to answer and even more difficult for the 38 people who volunteer to serve Boone County Water Rescue.

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Today, Appel planned to meet with county officials to talk about ways to pare back costs but keep the service.

We hope a way can be found to avoid dissolving the squad -- an operation whose costs is a minuscule percentage of the county's \$110-million budget. After all this an era in which volunteerism has become a byword from the White House down. But when volunteers provide a public service, they should be able to count on some level of public support.

Perhaps there are expenses that can be cut to keep the squad afloat. Surely some creative ways of sharing costs with the other political jurisdictions that benefit can be found.

Thirty-six years of service to the community deserves to be thrown a lifeline rather than abruptly scuttled.

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