

2006 NSA Crime Victim Services Award Recipient
Monroe County, Georgia, Sheriff's Office



Pictured from left to right: Sheriff John Whetsel, Chairman, NSA Crime Victim Services Committee; Sheriff John Cary Bittick, Monroe County, GA, Sheriff's Office; Director John Gillis, Office for Victims of Crime; Sgt. K. B. Ayer, Director/Victim Advocate, C.A.R.E. Cottage, Monroe County, GA, Sheriff's Office

The Monroe County, Georgia, Sheriff's Office is the 2006 recipient of NSA's *Crime Victim Services Award*. The award, which recognizes "outstanding achievement by a Sheriff's Office in support of victims," is funded by the Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice; administered by NSA's Standing Committee on Crime Victim Services; and formally presented by Sheriff John Whetsel, Chairman of the committee.

In 1992, the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, under the leadership of Sheriff John Cary Bittick, opened the C.A.R.E. Cottage. C.A.R.E. stands for Child Abuse Reporting Enforcement. The C.A.R.E. Cottage is believed to be the first children's advocacy center in the U.S. operated by a law enforcement agency. And still today, it is the only such center known to be operated by a Sheriff's Office. The Cottage is also now home to the Victim/Witness Assistance Program of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office and offers services, resources, and referrals to both child and adult victims of crime. In 2005, approximately 555 persons received assistance.

Only about one-third of all incidents reported to law enforcement ever go to trial. Thus, by having a children's advocacy center and victim/witness assistance program within the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, rather than in the District Attorney's Office, many more victims of crime receive the services they need and deserve.

The C.A.R.E. Cottage is staffed by Sgt. K.B. Ayer, Director/Victim Advocate; a second sworn law enforcement officer/investigator; two civilian victim services providers; a case worker from the county Department of Children & Family Services; and many volunteers. Since 2001, a newly-built Cottage has resided on beautiful, wooded land that was donated. The construction and interior layout of the Cottage are designed to offer a comfortable, home-like and child-friendly environment in a professional setting that is secure, video-surveilled, and furnished with an interview room, state-of-the-art camera equipment and other aids for recording victim interviews.

"Any program like the C.A.R.E. Cottage is lacking without community involvement," according to Sheriff Bittick; and, "in Monroe County, local civic clubs, churches, and schools are there to lend a helping hand." For example, volunteers of Project Linus, named after the *Peanuts* cartoon character, donate hand-made trauma blankets for distribution to both child and adult victims of crime. Furthermore, numerous community advisory groups have been formed that are comprised of representatives from multidisciplinary agencies and chaired by either the Sheriff or C.A.R.E. Cottage Director. For example, the Drug Endangered Children's Team was set up to lend a hand to the Narcotics Task Force in cases where children are at risk or have been harmed from living in a home where methamphetamine was manufactured.

Sheriff John Cary Bittick's goal in establishing the C.A.R.E. Cottage was "to provide hands-on help, protection, and guidance to those who most desperately need it in the community." The Cottage provides such help. The citizens of Monroe County have a victim services program that has the full backing of a Sheriff who is dedicated to insuring that all victims know they are not on the outside looking in, but that the justice system hears their voice and is working to serve and protect them.

Victims of crime and their survivors donate flowers and other plants for the *Memory Garden* at the C.A.R.E. Cottage. As these plants grow and their numbers multiply, they are a reminder that crime never ceases, but nor do the memories of how crime touches lives. And the efforts of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office to stop crime also never cease.

NSA established the Crime Victim Services Award in 2005 to focus national and local attention on law enforcement services provided to victims of crime; and in recognition of the unique needs of crime victims and that appropriate assistance to victims should be provided by law enforcement as early as possible in the response process. The award is funded by the Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice, and administered by the NSA Standing Committee on Crime Victim Services. The deadline for receipt by NSA of 2007 nominations is November 17, 2006. For more information, contact Tim Woods, Director of Research, Development & Grants, at 703-836-7827.