

The Joint Aviation Unit (JAU) is a cooperative effort between the Gainesville Police Department and the Alachua County Sheriff's Office. The mission of the JAU is to provide aerial support to all law enforcement and public safety agencies within the City of Gainesville and Alachua County.

The idea for the Joint Aviation Unit sprang from the student murders of 1990, five students from the University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College were murdered. A drifter was eventually apprehended and convicted of these crimes. (Danny Rollins).

During the search for the murderer, local agencies called in neighboring helicopters. Some GPD personnel flew as observers. During this exhaustive search, our staff realized the importance of searching from the air could cover much ground in less time. That is critical when searching for a suspect or a lost person and also police officer safety.

The Gainesville Police Department bought two helicopters in 1994, each for \$100. They began flying them in 1995 and eventually gave one to another county. The combined unit started in 1996. "

The Aviation Unit has flight crews from the Gainesville Police Department and the Alachua County Sheriff's Office that fly three military surplus OH-58 helicopters. The helicopters are all equipped with searchlights and Forward-Looking Infrared (FLIR) Thermal Imaging Cameras.

The Gainesville Police Department currently has one helicopter that was damaged in 2019, causing the aircraft not worthy of flight. Staff was searching for a replacement unit while operating an aircraft from the Alachua County Sheriff's office.

It is estimated that the annual cost of the existing unit to the City is \$300,000. Assuming there is an even sharing of cost off the unit with the Alachua County Sheriff Office, City neighbors and other property owners generate \$140,000 of the revenue that supports the unit; thus, bringing the City share to 73%.

In 2016, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported only about 350 law enforcement agencies in the U.S. had Aviation Programs in active use. This number has remained small due to the substantial cost of operating fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

The Gainesville Police Department is exploring the usage of "small unmanned aerial systems," also known as drones. These aircrafts can be used in criminal investigations, search and rescue operations. While they are, in many ways, similar to the manned aircraft that have been in use for many years. They have the potential to provide law enforcement with additional flexibility and yield life-saving benefits. The aircraft is a "benefit" to law enforcement; however, they should be used in conjunction with existing forms of air support. Florida Law prohibits the use of a drone to capture an image of privately owned property or the owner, tenant, or occupant of such property without consent if a reasonable expectation of privacy exists. There is pending legislation in this session to expand the authorized use of drones by law enforcement, for event crowds of 50 people or more, in traffic management and in the collection of evidence at crime and traffic crash scenes.