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Members of the Tampa division of the Fugitive Task Force try to serve a warrant at a Tampa home this month. This time, the person wasn't home.



[JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times]

TAMPA — Penelope Knox fixated on the red Ford Explorer at the stop sign ahead of her. "Why isn't she turning?" Knox, 31, said from her passenger seat in the undercover vehicle. "There aren't any cars coming." For the past hour, Knox and seven other members of the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force had been looking for a red Ford Explorer to enter this Progress Village neighborhood. This one was leaving. And the license plate number didn't match the one on the car they wanted.

It's the neighbor's car, said **Scott Ley**, trying to reassure her. **Ley was the 43-year-old deputy U.S. marshal coordinating this team.**

But Knox's suspicions persisted. Not until the Explorer turned out of view did she break her gaze — illustrating one truth about what it's like to stare through the windshield of an unmarked police vehicle with a gun on your belt: When you're looking for violent fugitives, the whole world can start to look suspect.

"I don't want to say that we're always looking for the bad in people," **Ley** said later as he drove north from Manatee County, where his team had just nabbed a sex offender who has eluded police for 12 years. "But I think we are more aware — we're always on alert."

Their wary eyes seem to yield results.

Since Jan. 1, the 13-member Tampa division of the Fugitive Task Force has closed 600 warrants by arresting roughly 500 fugitives — most with prior offenses that number in the double digits, **Ley** said.

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Besides deputies from the Marshals Service, the team includes officers from Tampa, St. Petersburg, Hillsborough County, Polk County, Florida the Department of Law Enforcement, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement service and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

They are charged with hunting down suspects that have eluded other agencies for one reason or another.

Task force methods are often much more plodding than what many in local law enforcement are accustomed to. They sometimes involve hours or days — even weeks — of monitoring a suspect's activities before knocking on a door, let alone moving in for an arrest.

"We feel that if we're a little more slow and methodical, it increases our chances of success," **Ley** said. "A lot of time we find that things start to fit a little better."

Last week, Deputy Marshal Miguel Lopez spent a day on and off his cell phone trying to track down information about an out-of-state murder suspect believed to be in Pinellas County.

After helping nab the sex offender in Manatee County, Lopez, a 15-year veteran of the Marshal's Service, decided the best course of action would be to keep researching while staking out the residences.

There could be a chance the information was bad — and a chance that simply knocking on a door would show the team's hand and flub the arrest.

So, Lopez, **Ley**, Knox and five others watched, waited, ran car tags and gathered other string with the help of analysts back in the office.

In the time that passed, anticipation turned to doubt. Movement at one residence that at first appeared suspicious started to look more innocuous, if not coincidental.

Everyday activity in the surrounding neighborhood took on almost surreal significance as the deputies searched for signs of wrongdoing.

A blow-up Santa on the corner inflated and deflated every few seconds. Kids with backpacks wandered out of school buses. A woman sat on the front porch in the house next door to the target house and chatted on her phone.

At one point, a young man walked hurriedly down the street and peered purposefully into each of the undercover vehicles before running ahead to make a cell phone call.

He turned out to be a UPS man.

Lopez was starting to have doubts. Earlier, this same team had gathered before sunrise to review a to-do list that was five names long.

Since then, they'd already searched a house in Ybor City and another in Progress Village. They had strapped on 20 pounds of gear — including bullet resistant vests, guns, Tasers and flashlights — and knocked on doors, pounded on trailer sides and talked to neighbors.

They'd driven to Port Manatee to track down Wayne A. Dodge, 50, a convicted rapist out of New York who had disappeared to Florida sometime after he fled from custody in 1996.

When they approached him, he was working on a broken-down forklift. They took him away in handcuffs.

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They know things don't always go this smoothly. In September, as the task force attempted to arrest a Tampa fugitive, the suspect, David Sills, took off running. During a foot pursuit, one marshal accidentally fired his gun at Sills, prompting an investigation into what had gone wrong. **Ley** said the team's primary goal is to arrest the bad guy and go home at the end of the day.

"It is a huge burden we carry," **Ley** said. "We're very serious about it."

Now, they were in Pinellas County on a murder case. And the rush of what-ifs was starting to fade. There was more work to be done on this one, **Ley** told the team during a 3 p.m. debriefing in a nearby church parking lot.

They agreed and headed back to their offices in downtown Tampa before ending a more than nine-hour day.

"If we have a chance to work it early, we're aggressive, but we're cautiously aggressive," **Ley** said later, explaining the ebb and flow of their work. "It doesn't have to be tomorrow."

Later that night, Hillsborough sheriff's deputies arrested James Walter Bailey, a 27-year-old fugitive wanted on a violation of probation from an aggravated battery with a deadly weapon conviction.

They dragged him out of a Tampa hotel room and placed him in handcuffs — an arrest made possible by the information the task force acquired earlier in the day during their search in Progress Village.