

Fighting terror may take political pull

Patriotism alone has its limitations, N.J. groups learn

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They're standing by, poised to help New Jersey in the war on terrorism.

But gung-ho isn't enough.

In uncertain times, some volunteers are learning, money, politics, competing jurisdictions and red tape trump even patriotism.

When that happens, they say, the art of persuasion is as important as military know-how.

"Lobbying skills are crucial,"



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lt. Col. Peter Kortright with Civil Air Patrol plane at Teterboro Airport.

said Lt. Col. Peter Kortright III of Fair Lawn, director of government relations for the New Jersey Wing

of the Civil Air Patrol, which is seeking a \$250,000 grant from the state – a huge increase from the

\$35,000 in state aid it currently receives.

The CAP needs the money because the Air Force, which supports it, has stopped paying liability insurance for the country's 52 CAP wings, citing commitments to the war in Iraq.

Nevertheless, Kortright has good reason to feel optimistic about getting state aid. He has three full-time lobbyists. Additional lobbying firepower is provided by the wing's "legislative squadron" – lawmakers who are CAP members.

Not every volunteer organization has that kind of help.

Members of the little-known New Jersey Naval Militia, for example, See **PULL** Page **A-8**

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ample, have been lobbying state officials for three years with letters and newspaper op-ed pieces, trying to prove they deserve a role in homeland security operations.

Militia members said they proved their worth on 9/11 by ferrying emergency officials and medical teams to Manhattan from Liberty State Park, providing river security at the George Washington Bridge and supporting the Coast Guard at Sandy Hook.

"It was a hard-charging unit," said Kurt Ahlstrom of Sweetwater.

Some members even dipped into their own pockets to buy boat parts when there were no state funds available.

But state officials pulled the plug on the "navy" in 2002, citing a budget crisis and questions about liability insurance and procedures for members' background and security checks.

"We can't do anything," said the Rev. Errico Ianniello of Bayville, Berkeley Township, a militia chaplain. "We can't even put our boats in the water."

Militia members acknowledge there were problems with training, background checks and physical standards.

But those problems "could have been addressed and would have been ad-

ressed had they been brought up by the Department of Military [and Veterans] Affairs and the adjutant general," said Ahlstrom, who recently resigned.

One officer who did not want to be identified said the naval militia was disbanded because Democrats saw it as a "Republican" navy. Gov. Christie Whitman reactivated the militia in 1999, after it had been disbanded in 1963.

"Most of our guys don't care who's in office," Ianniello said. "Donald Duck could be the governor. We want to serve."

"It all comes down to political courage to do the right thing," said another militia member, who also did not want to be identified.

Officials in the state Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs deny politics played a role, but the members don't doubt that some high-powered lobbying would be helpful.

"Anything that's going to push it [the militia] and put it in front of the people and put pressure on the right people isn't going to hurt," Ianniello said. "But in any military organization, you have to be careful of what you say.

"The point is, we have a bunch of people who want to volunteer, and we could

be used for the benefit of the state if the state would use us."

Kortright said the key to successful lobbying is to play it straight.

"In this game of funding, you lose if you play politics," he said. "You have to go in based on honor and professionalism, show how professional you are. For the most part, they [legislators] have responded to that."

The day after 9/11, the Air Force asked the Civil Air Patrol to perform reconnaissance missions, including photographing the damage at the World Trade Center site from the air.

But without liability insurance, the CAP has been forced to "prioritize missions not funded by the Air Force," Kortright said. "We've been mostly training [in the classroom] for the past two years."

When the New Jersey Wing received its Air Force funding this year — \$14,800 — the wing commander, Col. Robert Diduch of Hamilton Township, said: "We can chew that up in a couple months [of] training."

Covering all bases, the Civil Air Patrol will be ready if the state grant does not come through, Kortright said. "We have a bill in Congress to get funding for insurance," he said. "Even if this [the state

grant] doesn't work out, we have a national strategy in place."

One thing that did catch Civil Air Patrol strategists by surprise was the sudden announcement last August that Gov. James E. McGreevey would resign.

"One aspect unique to New Jersey ... we've had a change in governors three times," Kortright said. Republican state Senate President Donald T. DiFrancesco became acting governor when Whitman left in January 2001 to assume the Cabinet post of administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. McGreevey was elected in November 2001 and took office in January 2002. Then came McGreevey's resignation and acting Governor Codey's assumption of the office. He'll serve until someone is chosen in this year's gubernatorial election and inaugurated next January.

"Now, again, we have to familiarize ourselves with whoever the next governor will be," Kortright said. "Three governors, that's kind of part of the problem. When you have one governor for a while, you get continuity for a while, and get that relationship. But now we're up and down."

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