NORTH AMERICA TALK

CopsForHire
Olympia's newest technology startup

a passion for place
The team that brought us ThurstonTalk has launched five new Talk platforms and has more launch plans on the horizon.

REVIEW: NEW OVERTIME RULE

BUILDING COMMUNITY PROSPERITY FOR OVER 140 YEARS
By Natasha Ashenhurst

When you walk into a business called CopsforHire you expect to find, well, cops for hire. That is not the case at Olympia's newest tech startup operating out of the beautiful Steam Plant Building in downtown Olympia.

Instead, what you find is a well-designed, open-concept office space filled with hand-crafted work tables, computers, fairy lights and white boards—as well as programmers, program managers, designers, marketing experts and an office dog named Ava.

You will find one cop, who happens to be retired, CopsForHire founder Andrew “Drew” Finley.

You might have heard of Finley’s other business, 911 Driving School, which is now a franchise with hundreds of schools across the country. CopsForHire is his latest project, which attracted the support of Seattle’s mobile gaming entrepreneur David Bluhm.

Finley was selling 911 Driving School in 2013 when he had the big idea behind CopsForHire.

Some police officers are allowed to work off-duty, and organizations—like Zappos, Microsoft, Costco and the NFL—hire them across the country for games, marathons or business events. When Finley was a deputy in Pierce County, he logged more than 900 off-duty hours in a single year.

“Cops are allowed to work off duty as long as they have supervisorial and jurisdictional approval,” Finley said.

Nationally, there are 780,000 commissioned officers, and approximately 43 percent of them are working 6.9 off-duty hours per week with an average pay of $53 per hour. This amounts to a $6.4 billion market for CopsForHire today.

Finley knew that if he could find a system to organize the complexity of finding and
hiring off-duty cops — just as he did for students and parents with the driving school — he'd have another business.

“When police officers work off-duty they are subject to complex rules, which vary from department to department,” said Finley. “What we needed was an electronic software solution — an online marketplace — where each department and each police officer builds a profile, as well as each customer interested in hiring an off-duty officer.

“We'd automate an incredibly complex system.”

a marketplace promoting transparency

“I pitched it to [Bluhm] for funding, but instead of simply funding it he was excited to join the business because of its potential to help ease the tension between law enforcement and the communities — to help communities heal,” said Finley.

Bluhm, a veteran entrepreneur, knew the business needed three elements: a subject matter expert, someone to manage the technical space and IT infrastructure, and an operator. Finley is the subject matter expert, world-class programmers were staffed, and Rob McDermott was hired as CEO. McDermott had worked for three of Bluhm’s startups and was eager to join this new venture.

When McDermott joined the team, Bluhm gave him the choice of location for the company’s headquarters.

“Bluhm called and said, ‘Pioneer Square or Bellevue, take your pick.’ I said, ‘Olympia’. I am from Olympia, Drew lives in Puyallup and our developers were all over the country meeting virtually at the time,” said McDermott. “So, we met with the team and asked them to move to Olympia, we found this space and in December we signed the lease. We’re growing rapidly and world-class talent is excited to re-locate here.”

In addition to the great quality of life they sought in Olympia, Finley had built relationships in his 17 years as a commissioned officer, and many of those relationships were with local officers—like Thurston County Sheriff John Snaza.

“When we started evangelizing our idea, Sheriff Snaza said he wanted to be the first to provide his agency with an opportunity to recover all costs to his agency while partnering with a private entity to ensure all public assists are accounted for,” said McDermott. “Our plan was to roll-out first locally with the Thurston County Sheriff’s office before opening the marketplace up nationally. However, word is spreading and now we’re having departments across the country contact us – including the Seattle Police Department, one of the largest on the West Coast.

“In addition, we’ve received a lot of calls, from a recording artist going on tour, big box stores tired of using security companies and many others. We’ve also made contact with the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents labor for a third of the cops in the country. It’s been hard to put the brakes on all of this at times as we work to ready the technical capabilities of our marketplace with all the demand.”

Once fully launched, CopsForHire will match off-duty officers with customers looking to hire them, while building jurisdictional rules and regulations into the software and developing the infrastructure to allow police departments to recover lost assets such as fuel costs.

“Let’s imagine that Panowicz Jewelers is going to have a trunk show, and they want to hire two off-duty police officers to secure the event,” said McDermott. “Panowicz would simply go online and build a job, indicating the day, location and the number of officers needed. If they need a K9 unit or a car, they could select those as options. If they need officers trained in crowd control or to hire officers with medical certifications those options are built into the selection process.

“Our system knows the jurisdiction, knows the rules, requests the officers and, when the job is completed, we route money back to the department for their recovered assets, pay the officers and take a small transaction fee. Just like eBay or Uber, the entire transaction takes place within our marketplace. Our whole model is about automating complexity and driving it through email, phone and the Web.”

In addition, the team is building in what they call “fairness features,” which allow for diversity and inclusive transparency for the officers interested in working off-duty. The system also provides real time access to data for all participants in the marketplace, which improves fiduciary responsibility.

CopsForHire is transforming a complex system that is difficult, frustrating and paper-driven into a simplified system that might ultimately improve departmental fiduciary oversight, inclusiveness and transparency.

“In addition, we’re building a compelling technology company right here in Olympia because this is a great place to do it!” said McDermott.