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# Law's long helping hand

## U.S. cops reach out to brother officer from Ecuador



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ecuadorean police Lt. Sammy Vinueza arriving Friday at Hackensack University Medical Center in new wheelchair, a gift from brother cops in U.S.

By **WALTER DAWKINS**  
STAFF WRITER

When police Lt. Sammy Vinueza was shot by two men in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 2000, a bullet tore through his spine and paralyzed his legs, leaving him defenseless.

"The guys took my gun and shot me, and then set my clothes on fire," said Vinueza, 30, who was leaving the home of Ecuador's justice minister, whom he was assigned to protect.

The paralyzed officer, who is visiting New Jersey this week to get a new wheelchair and a neurological examination, was left "naked, helpless and bleeding from my wound on the pavement, while I was screaming for help," he said Friday.

Vinueza was hospitalized in Ecuador, but the police department there had little money to cover his medical care in an impoverished country with an antiquated health-care system. Vinueza slowly worsened, losing almost all control over his arms. Because he had an old, dilapidated

manual wheelchair, he couldn't get around, and he couldn't do basic tasks, such as cleaning and feeding himself and brushing his teeth.

Desperate and living on a \$200-a-month pension, he used a friend's computer to access the Internet and found the National Police Defense Foundation, a U.S. organization that helps police officers who have debilitating medical problems. It also provides legal services to officers, offers \$10,000 rewards through the Safe

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# Benevolence: U.S. cops assist paralyzed Ecuadorean officer

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Cop program for information leading to the arrest of anyone who shoots an NPDF officer and posts rewards for finding missing and kidnapped children.

"He sent us an e-mail telling us his story," said Port Authority Police Officer Michael Barry, who is also on NPDF's executive board. "When I read it, all he said was that he wanted to be able to get in and out of his house."

Barry and NPDF Executive Director Joseph Occhipinti were so moved by Vinueza's story that they flew him to the United States on Wednesday night and arranged for him to meet Friday with Dr. Arno Fried, chairman of the Neurosurgery Department at Hackensack University Medical Center, to see whether they could help him.

"Hackensack Medical Center stepped up to the plate," said Barry who lives in River Edge. "They know he doesn't have any money and that he's never going to have any money, but they wanted to try to help him. It's a great humanitarian act."

The NPDF gave Vinueza a \$3,500 state-of-the-art electronic wheelchair — donated by Sunrise Medical — at its annual awards dinner Thursday in Queens.

"They built a chair for him and painted it NYPD Blue," Barry said. "Now, just



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Port Authority police officers and a Hackensack University Medical Center security guard helping Ecuadorean police Lt. Sammy Vinueza as he arrived at the hospital.

in 24 hours since he got the chair, he's starting to regain movement of his right arm already. He feels he has more self-worth. He can get around a little bit more and he's not totally reliant on people pushing him.

"He started talking, and he never talks," Barry added. "He got very emotional."

Fried said he would conduct an initial evaluation and a neurological examination and order some imaging scans to determine the extent of Vinueza's injuries. He also said he plans to set up an evaluation by a physical therapist, a necessary first step if he decides to perform surgery. "Hopefully, we can help his mobility

"Hackensack Medical Center stepped up to the plate."

MICHAEL BARRY, PORT AUTHORITY POLICE OFFICER

and help him become more independent," Fried said. "If he does have jumpiness or pain in the legs, hopefully we can help that [as well]."

Fried said that when he was asked to help Vinueza, he was happy to oblige.

"Neurosurgery is a field where every patient who comes to us has a deficit that really strikes at the core of who they are," Fried said. "The problems that I see as a neurosurgeon involve walking, talking, thinking and movement. And to give them a specialized approach to treatment to help their place in life is very rewarding."

Occhipinti, NPDF's executive director, said the group also is committed to finding the two men who shot Vinueza.

"It troubled us that they never caught the suspects," Occhipinti said. "And one of the things we announced Thursday night was the Safe Cop award, where it would be the first time that we posted that in a foreign country."

"I'm very happy," Vinueza said as he sat in a car outside Hackensack University Medical Center after being brought there by a police escort from his hotel in Fort Lee. "It hasn't yet sunk in, all the beautiful things that are happening to me and all the help I'm getting from everyone here. I'm very grateful."

His mother, Alicia Vinueza, who takes care of Sammy and traveled with him from Ecuador, was equally moved by his outpouring of generosity.

"I'm very grateful and I'm very emotional seeing all these police officers and everyone helping my son being able to come here," she said. "They all have great hearts."

Donations for Vinueza can be made to the National Police Defense Foundation's Lt. Sammy Vinueza Fund, 21 Kilmer Drive, Building 2, Suite F, Morganville, NJ 07751.

E-mail: dawkins@northjersey.com