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Spot a crime? You can now text message the details

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By SCOTT GUTIERREZ
P-I REPORTER

Want to stop criminals from "LOL" by thinking they can get away from the long arm of technology?

Starting Friday, anyone with information on a crime in the Seattle metro area can text a crime tip to the authorities.

Crime Stoppers of the Puget Sound launched a new "Text-a-Crime-Tip" program, which organizers hope will tap into the popularity of text messaging, especially among younger people (who know that "LOL" means "laughing out loud)."

Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske planned to join Crime Stoppers in announcing the endeavor, in development over the past year, at a news conference Friday.

"Today's generation is into text messaging. E-mail and telephones are, like, things of the past," said Ron Conlin, Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound president, adding, "We think this will basically open up Crime Stoppers to a lot of eyes and ears that maybe hadn't been opened before."

Seattle will become the third city nationally to launch a text-a-tip program, behind Boston and Cincinnati. Boston's program, however, uses different software and the police department manages the program instead of a nonprofit Crime Stoppers organization.

Text messages are quick bits of dialogue that people tap out on cell phones and send instead of calling. Consumers sent 363 billion text messages last year, up from 81 billion in 2006, according to CTIA, the Washington, D.C.-based wireless industry association.

Texting and instant messaging have their own abbreviated jargon, with acronyms such as BRB (be right back) or 187 (a text code used as slang for a murder).

Conlin thinks that some witnesses might feel safer anonymously text messaging from a crime scene than being overheard calling 911 or talking to police. Police are open to the possibilities.

"It's hard to say whether it's going to work better or not, but we're certainly in favor of any more communication we can get from the public," King County Sheriff's Sgt. John Urquhart said.

"It's one of the waves of the future and old guys like us will never do it, but 20-somethings on up certainly will," he said. "So let's use the technology that people are using and, while we here in the police department aren't on the cutting edge of doing that, if Crime Stoppers is, so much the better."

In Boston, the city's Text-a-Tip program helped solved two homicides and fielded hundreds of tips during its first few months of operation, the Boston Herald reported.

About 10 tipsters sent messages while crimes were in progress and were asked to call 911, Boston Police Officer Michael Charbonnier said.

Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound, which doesn't ask for tipsters' identities, averages about 40 tips a month.

Cell phone calls and Web traffic leave an electronic trail that without interference can be traced and produced under a court order. One of the biggest challenges in creating the Text-a-Crime-Tip program was developing a system that scrubs phone numbers or other identifiers from the tipsters' phones to preserve anonymity.

To do that, Crime Stoppers text messages are bounced between multiple servers thousands of miles apart, including one in Canada, where they are encrypted and assigned an alias and transferred back to a main database,

said Kevin Anderson of Anderson Software LLC, which designed the program, TipSoft SMS.

Anderson is also the information technology chairman of Crime Stoppers International.

In Canada, Crime Stoppers is afforded stronger legal protections for sources' anonymity under a recent Canadian Supreme Court decision, which is another reason why the organization wants sensitive data stored north of the border.

"As long as we don't have the identifying information in our country, there is nothing to disclose," Anderson said.

Said Conlin: "If we're saying it's going to be anonymous, we're going to swear by it."

Another potential pitfall with the program was the risk of high-dollar charges for service if tips suddenly flooded in. Crime Stoppers plans to publicize the program through radio ads and three billboards.

"We're scared to death that this is going to be too successful," Conlin said.

But Anderson, the software developer, was able to secure unlimited monthly service for $49.99 month from mBlox, a wireless aggregator. The monthly fee is the only cost to Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound, which operates on a $125,000 annual budget from donations and grants.

Crime Stoppers has encouraged phone tips since 1986 and started two years ago taking tips through e-mail, which now accounts for about 40 percent of information, Conlin said.

E-mail has allowed tipsters to upload photographs, he said. Tips are screened and forward to appropriate case detectives. If a tip about a homicide suspect skipping town trickles in after hours, the system pages a Crime Stoppers official, Conlin said.

Tipsters use their "alias" number to check on their reward if an arrest is made. In the Puget Sound area, only 22 percent of tipsters ask for the reward, Conlin said.

The tip texting program currently cannot accept photos or videos, though officials hope eventually to be able to do so.

The tip texting program also will be available in Snohomish, Kitsap and Island counties.

Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound, which serves King, Kitsap, Snohomish and Island counties, has helped clear 4,185 felony cases and recover $3.2 million of stolen property.

"TEXT-A-CRIME-TIP"

- Dial CRIMES, or 274637
- Start a new text message using the term "Tip486" and then a space before including the crime details you wish to send.
- You will then receive an alias number and instructions. The alias number can be used to check on a reward if your tip leads to an arrest.
- Additional messages from the same phone or about the same tip will not receive a reply.
- Crimes Stoppers suggests tipsters then delete their tip for their own safety.

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