

Technology helps Atlantic County group fight crime, one tip at a time

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Atlantic County Crime Stoppers treasurer Paul Rosenberg, of Egg Harbor Township, left, President Dave Carter, of Margate, and Vice President Kevin Walsh, of Egg Harbor Township, right, look over promotional materials Monday during a meeting with a reporter.

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The phone number for Atlantic County Crime Stoppers jumps out in bright red from dozens of bumper stickers, on everything from taxis to police cars - and soon will even be emblazoned on classroom walls.

In 2011, the numbers were clear - no one was calling.

Not a single tip to Atlantic County Crime Stoppers came into the group's call center - but almost 300, more than 95 percent of all tips received, came through the group's year-old website.

The change marks a vast shift in how anonymous tips are received and processed, said the group's leaders, and is an important step in an era when a stigma against "snitching" has been reinforced in many neighborhoods.

"We thought the 800 number was busy, and everything depended on (it), said Atlantic County Crime Stoppers President Dave Carter, of Margate. "All of a sudden, things were all coming in on the website, and information was a lot more detailed."

The number of tips was much lower in 2009, said Vice President Kevin Walsh, of Egg Harbor Township.

"We were totally dependent on the telephone," Walsh said. "But people weren't trusting the telephone. They were asking, 'Oh, are you listening in? Is it being recorded?'"

Crime Stoppers - completely run by civilian volunteers, although they have a liaison with the Atlantic County Sheriff's Office - goes to great lengths to ensure total anonymity. When someone enters information onto the site, they are automatically assigned a code number - "The only person who knows the code number is you," Walsh said.

A law-enforcement coordinator, the only person with access to the system, will read the tip, pass along the information to the proper authorities and assign it a new code number. When the tipster returns to the site to coordinate when and where to pick up the \$1,000 reward - by entering the first code number to confirm his or her identity - the system automatically gets rid of the first two numbers and assigns a third, which the treasurer uses to create a contract for payment. The cash payment is handed out by a third party at a discreet location.

"I have no clue other than the tipster's number," said treasurer Paul Rosenberg, of Egg Harbor Township - and whose Yellow Cabs in Atlantic City all sport Crime Stoppers bumper stickers.

Walsh added that the group does not even know a tipster's IP address, and tipsters have never been called to court to testify.

"We've never had a situation where anyone has pointed a finger or had their identity learned through any step," Carter said.

Of course, tipsters have to be careful not to expose themselves.

"One thing I told callers all the time is that if you want to stay anonymous, keep your mouth shut," Walsh said. "Don't go telling your friends and family you called Crime Stoppers. ... I do know a couple of them who called me and said, 'How did my info get out?' I asked them, 'Who'd you tell?', and they'd say, 'My girlfriend.' 'Then you're an idiot! I told you not to tell anyone! Who'd the girlfriend tell?' Eventually, he did get the cash reward, and the information did lead to a drug arrest."

The cash rewards are handed out after a grand jury indictment and are not dependent on a conviction. The \$1,000 number is also chosen for a reason - any more, and the IRS wants information for tax purposes.

The fact that the group can pay rewards is why they believe it is the best method of collecting anonymous information, especially after the Atlantic City Police Department began its own texting tips service.

"Don't reinvent the wheel, when, in fact, you already have a service in place," Walsh said.

They said the tips they receive often are tied to "whatever the crime of the moment is," Walsh said, citing recent shootings in Atlantic City and Pleasantville.

One recent tip came in so quickly that an arrest was turned around in hours.

"There was a burglary," Walsh said, "and it just so happened the burglar told somebody. That person had sense enough to go right on and write (a tip). The law-enforcement coordinator text-messaged police right away, and literally within hours (the tipster) was able to get a reward."

Of course, not all tipsters are angels themselves. At least \$7,000 in rewards remains unclaimed, they said - "We don't know where those people are," Walsh said. "We have to wait for them to call us" - but they have some idea of what intervened.

"We assume they're criminals and they're locked up, waiting to complete their sentence," Walsh said.

Sometimes, tipsters have said outright that they are trying to get the competition off the street - "And they do!" Walsh said. "They dime each other out."

Other times, the answer to "How do you know this person?" is that "'He's my relative,'" Walsh said. "'But it's Christmastime, and we need rent money.'"

Now, the group hopes to expand awareness through creating new stickers and posters emphasizing the website, adding posters to classrooms in Egg Harbor Township and by creating a two-minute segment on a local news station - if they can find a production sponsor.

The website has been in existence only for about a year, Walsh said, but the future looks bright.

"We've gotten somebody to pay for the website for the next five years," he said. "We have hardly any overhead, and no office. We are who we are."

If you can help

Tipsters can anonymously contact Atlantic County Crime Stoppers by visiting www.crimestoppersatlantic.com or by calling or texting 609-652-1234 or 800-658-TIPS (8477). Cash awards of as much as \$1,000 are given anonymously to the person who provides information leading to an arrest or indictment.

Contact Steven Lemongello:

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