Dropping the dime on crime

Citizen callers help catch crooks

By Laura Heck
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A poster on the wall behind Lafayette Police Sgt. Bill Delahoussaye’s desk displays the black and white photographs of Crime Stoppers’ most wanted fugitives.

The word “apprehended” is stamped in red ink across one of the mug shot faces and others have black “x” marks over them, both indications that the fugitive has been caught and evidence that Lafayette’s Crime Stoppers program is working.

“Our wanted posters have been successful,” Delahoussaye said. “Hopefully, they will continue with their success.”

Since the 1983 inception of the local Crime Stoppers, an organization which offers up to $1,000 in cash rewards for information leading to the arrest and conviction of felons, 7,849 calls have been received and 1,826 cases have been handled.

“I think the program is very successful because of the statistics we keep, the arrests made and the people helped by it,” Delahoussaye said. “We’re one of the top ones in the state, without a doubt, because of the support we get from the community.”

Delahoussaye said when law enforcement officials have exhausted all leads on a specific crime, they turn to Crime Stoppers, which uses newspapers and local television stations to describe and request specific information.

Delahoussaye said the purpose of “The Crime of the Week” and “Crime Stoppers Most Wanted,” two of their more popular programs, is to generate information from anyone who may have witnessed or have information regarding a crime.

“We try to get information as detailed as possible,” he said.

Delahoussaye explained how the program works: Local citizens, when they have information about a crime, call the organization, which operates with a staff of three people from an unidentified location.

Crime Stoppers then investigates the tips, which generally lead to the arrest of a suspect.

Crime Stoppers International, a worldwide organization overseeing the local chapters, reported a 94 percent conviction rate on arrests made from tips.

Sometimes mothers call about crimes their children have committed, Delahoussaye said. Other times, friends give information about peers involved in criminal activities.

“We also get calls from people who don’t want the reward,” Delahoussaye said. “They say they’re doing their civic duty.”

Delahoussaye said he has even taken calls before the organization, and sometimes even law enforcement officials, are aware the crime has been committed.

But law enforcement officials said more crimes would be solved if citizens would have the courage to pick up the phone and call Crime Stoppers.

“A lot of people don’t want to get involved because of their position or because they don’t want to go to court,” said Deputy Tony Ash of the Lafayette Parish Sheriff’s Department. Ashy also works with Crime Stoppers.

But callers remain anonymous, Ashy said. That means they do not have to appear in court or have to worry about a criminal finding out their identity, he added.

“We don’t want to know who they are,” Delahoussaye said. “We don’t keep phone records and there’s no ‘Caller ID’ to trace anyone.”

Delahoussaye said each caller is assigned a code and asked to call back to see if their tip has led to an arrest. He said when the caller phones again, the information is double-checked to make sure the reward is going to the right person.

“We need to make the public aware and continue making them aware that callers are anonymous and we do follow up on every lead we get,” he said.

Ashy explained the tips sometimes take a while to investigate, sometimes as long as six months.

But I guarantee it is getting passed on, worked on and followed up,” Ashy said. “Callers just have to have patience.”

Delahoussaye said the majority of the calls they receive are related to crimes involving narcotics.

“Most of the calls are about that because they’re so prevalent and everyone wants to get away from them,” he said.

Delahoussaye added that these 426 calls are 95% in 1995 — have led to the recovery of over $19 million worth of illegal drugs.

In addition, over $2 million worth of stolen property has been recovered.

Twelve homicides, 14 attempted homicides, four rapes, 83 armed robberies, 277 residential burglaries, 120 commercial burglaries, 141 felony thefts and several other cases have been handled over the past 12 years.

Delahoussaye said Crime Stoppers also oversees a program, Quick 50, to recover stolen vehicles.

“What would you do today if someone took your car?” he asked. “We came up with this program to get people their vehicles back.”

With Quick 50, callers can receive $50 for reporting where a stolen vehicle is located, even if no arrests are made.

Appropriately, the program has recovered 50 vehicles to date.

Although Crime Stoppers offers rewards for reporting information concerning felony crimes, Delahoussaye encouraged citizens to report misdemeanor crimes as well.

Since 1983, 211 misdemeanor cases have been solved from tips.

Crime Stoppers has also made efforts to get area teenagers involved in “taking a bite out of crime.”

Delahoussaye said students in five local high schools — Acadiana High School, Carencro High School, Comeaux High School, Northside High School and St. Thomas More High School — are working to publicize Crime Stoppers in their schools.

He said students will be able to report vandalism, theft, drug deals and other crimes, and receive a small reward if the information can be verified.

“We hope students will give us information that will make their schools safer for them,” Delahoussaye said. “No one wants drug dealers in schools or their things taken.”

Crime Stoppers, a non-profit organization, does not receive any funds from the state or federal government to reward callers. So the organization, which averages about 60 calls each month, sponsors fund-raising events and solicits donations.

Delahoussaye said they receive donations from concerned citizens, some of whom send yearly checks, and local businesses.

Crime Stoppers International reported more than $35 million in rewards have been paid since the group’s inception in New Mexico in 1976.

They also reported solving over 500,000 cases worldwide and recovering over $946 million in property and over $2 billion in narcotics.

Citizens who have witnessed a crime or have information that could lead to the arrest of a suspect should call Crime Stoppers at 232-TIPS or 1-800-303-TIPS.