Finding crooks? 'There's an app for that'

By Zach Pluhacek, Lincoln Journal Star
Friday, October 15, 2010

The idea popped into Tom Casady's head during a one-night trip to Los Angeles.

The Lincoln police chief wanted a beer, he says, so he pulled out his smart phone, pushed a button and said "brew pub." Within seconds, a map appeared, showing three nearby businesses that served pale ale and fried food.

If only it was this easy to track sex offenders, Casady mused.

Cue the metaphorical light bulb.

Thanks to that moment of inspiration, researchers and developers at the University of Nebraska are planning to test their own law enforcement-based version of the program Casady used to pinpoint a pint.

Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady (From The Chief's Corner blog)

Instead of pubs, count registered sex offenders, parolees, known gang members and the 1,200 people with Lincoln police arrest warrants among possible search topics.

About 40 Lincoln Police Department officers will test the software, maybe as soon as early next year.

"I think it's gonna take us about six months to develop the technology," said Alan Tomkins, director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center. "It's exclusive to LPD."

Developers are hoping to have the program available for laptops, iPhones and Droid smart phones.

It's not clear what the app will look like or how it will be controlled, but Casady says it will be a "game changer," allowing officers to essentially be smarter than they really are.

And most of the technology exists already.

LPD and other police departments already use Geographic Information Systems, or GIS, to map crime trends and addresses of people of interest. And many cars and cell phones come equipped with GPS, which uses satellites to track locations.

The NU team is planning to combine police GIS and GPS data into a program that would instantly create maps tailored to officers' specific locations, similar to the way a handheld GPS might show the nearest burger joint or cardiac hospital.

For example, an officer driving past 45th Street and Old Cheney Road could either be alerted to or see on a map any parolees living in the area. The information would even be updated automatically as he or she drives.

"When they come across points of interest, there will be some kind of cue given to them. Some kind of alert -- visual or sound-based," said Ashok Samal, a professor in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of Computer Science and Engineering.

The project is LPD's latest initiative in "push technology" -- an Internet-based technology that essentially feeds information to users, rather than requiring them to seek it out.

The department already is using some such applications. Officers can sign up to receive alerts on specific people or cases. Others, including Casady, get alerts that help spot trends.

"I've been very interested in push technology," Casady said Wednesday.

"It's a form of push," he said of the program being developed, "but it's push with a twist."

The National Institute of Justice is overseeing the project, a joint effort by LPD, the NU Public Policy Center and the UNL Department of Computer Science and Engineering.

The NIJ is funding the research and development for at least a year with a $294,517 grant. LPD also can use that money to buy equipment for the project.

Samal's team will work with police to study the new program's performance, while the Public Policy Center will research its effect on law enforcement.

NU's Tomkins said the app might help promote equity in police enforcement.

Rather than picking and choosing what areas they scour for people with outstanding warrants or parole violators, officers would be fed that information regardless of where they're patrolling, Tomkins said.

"The GPS doesn't really care who the person is."

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