

Crime Alert

by Paul E. Lacy

Crime Alert began in 1979 with a grant from the State Office of Criminal Justice Planning. Its concept is to encourage citizens to increase their cooperation in apprehending criminals and solving crime. In the past, many people feared becoming involved because of possible retaliation from criminals.

In 1981, the Crime Alert Award Commission, comprised of 32 members and leaders of the local business community, filed articles of incorporation. The commission reviews cases which result in an arrest and determine the award to be allocated. The reward commission is a non-profit organization funded entirely from private contributions. The primary source of income comes from the annual "Fun Run," where runners, joggers and walkers pay to participate.

Crime Alert is headquartered in the Community Resources section of the Sacramento Police Department. Officer Bill Wilson has been involved with the program since its beginning. Bill oversees the submission of wanted criminals information to the media, the Ten Most wanted list to the *Sacramento Union* and directs crime reenactment videos for television.

Deborah Viney joined the Crime Alert program in 1986 and handles the administrative work, including answering call-ins, routing the information to investigations and arranging for the reward payments.

The success of crime Alert depends on the anonymity of the callers. When citizens call the Crime Alert number, 443-HELP or 1-800-AA-CRIME, with information on a crime or a wanted person, they are assigned a code number. The citizens do not reveal their identities and are advised to call back for a disposition on the case.

The information, which may concern any crime or be in response to media publications or broadcasts of wanted persons, is routed to the appropriate agency and investigators for follow-up. If the information results in an arrest it is forwarded to the Crime

Alert Reward Commission. The commission decides if the information qualifies for an award, and if so, determines the amount.

When citizens call back in two weeks, they are advised whether the information led to an arrest and whether a reward will be paid. If there is to be a reward, arrangements are made to meet the caller at a specific location for payment. A representative from Crime Alert pays the reward after the caller gives the proper code number. The caller's identity remains anonymous, unless he or she volunteers to testify. In such cases, the reward is doubled.

While Crime Alert is located at the Sacramento Police Department, 51 other agencies throughout northern and central California currently participate in the program. The roles of other agencies are expanding, and some law enforcement departments are beginning to contribute money for rewards.

Participation in the program has been growing since Crime Alert's inception. In 1982 there were 399 calls to Crime Alert, resulting in 30 arrests. A total of \$3,300 was paid in rewards. In 1987 there were 1,172 calls, 86 arrests and rewards totalling \$27,650. In March of 1988 a record 116 calls were received, resulting in 25 arrests.

Viney, who takes most of the incoming calls, says there is a significant increase in the number of calls received on the days that information is published in the newspaper or broadcast on the radio or television. The public's increased response on those days indicates the importance of mass media involvement to the success of the Crime Alert program.

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