Project TIPLINE

During a critical incident, rapid collection, processing and dissemination of information is vital to the outcome of an investigation. Tip lines have become more popular in recent years as an investigative tool, and law enforcement agencies now have new advanced tip line technology at their disposal.

Project TIPLINE is a free Internet-automated tip collection, management and analytic tool. The software is used to collect and analyze data and can be modified to meet an agency's specific needs. A handbook is included that reviews standard operating procedures for tip lines, how to handle large numbers of tips and how agencies can prepare for events and incidents that might use a tip line system.

The impetus for the project was the sniper shootings that occurred in the Washington, D.C., area during three weeks in the fall of 2002. Ten people were killed and three wounded. Lee Boyd Malvo, who was 17 years old at the time of the shootings, and John Allen Muhammad, were arrested at a Maryland highway rest stop and subsequently convicted and sentenced in some of the attacks.

Police received thousands of tips during the investigation. In the aftermath, authorities held a symposium organized by Dr. Cynthia Lum of George Mason University, the developer of Project TIPLINE, to discuss and determine lessons learned during the investigation. What emerged was the need for a sophisticated automated tip line system that could sort and analyze tips as they came in.

"During the sniper investigation, police received lots of tips from multiple locations, and there was a need to coordinate and examine tips quickly and efficiently," says Lum, who developed the handbook and software.

Development of TIPLINE involved consultation with police in Montgomery County, Md., and the Fairfax County and Manassas City Police departments in Virginia. In the final stages of development, researchers tested the system at the Moss Point Police Department in Mississippi.

Funding was provided by the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice through an interagency agreement with the U.S. Department of Defense Space and Naval Systems Command (SPAWAR), according to Joey Pomperada of SPAWAR, who served as TIPLINE project manager. SPAWAR in turn contracted with Northeastern University for the research phase of the project and collaborated with George Mason University to develop the TIPLINE software and handbook.

During the first phase of the project, which began in 2005, researchers examined the nature and state of tip lines in the United States. The research team found that the most common use of tip lines was for police to receive and examine information tip-by-tip, evaluating and prioritizing as each tip is received, and that the needs of law enforcement agencies regarding tip lines were not being adequately met. For the most part, tip lines lacked analytic and automated components, although some development of tip line applications and software had been done, such as Rapid Start, used by the FBI for case/tip management.

"Most tip lines in the U.S. consist of a manual, paper-based system," Lum says. "Handwritten tips are sometimes entered into computerized spreadsheets, but there is often no analysis or mapping of tips.

"The concept of what was needed was simple: a software application that could increase the efficiency of tip lines by receiving and automating tips quickly, but that also could analyze tips for patterns that would be useful for the police in their operations. With TIPLINE, not only can police collect tips from multiple locations into a single database that can be analyzed, but the analysis has operational and strategic meaning. Further, the tip line handbook provides information on how agencies can prepare for critical incidents and provides examples and suggestions on a variety of operational activities,

from setting up a tip line command center to what types of analysis might be generated and how such analyses might be used in investigation."

The last phase of the project was finalizing the software and testing it. The developers' law enforcement partners provided feedback about both the handbook and software. The free software was released in August 2008, restricted to government agencies.

Uses for tip lines are not limited to high-profile, critical events such as the Washington area sniper case. Law enforcement can use tip lines for a variety of reasons, including missing person cases, terrorism prevention and response, natural disaster recovery efforts, cold case investigations, community-based drug reduction efforts and such mundane matters as reporting trash in an alley.

"The software uses basic technology similar to online surveys," says Lum. "Tipsters do not have to call tips in, which reduces call volume during critical incidents. They can go online and type in information through an agency Web site. If a person does not have access to the Internet, they can still call in a tip, which is then entered by an officer or dispatcher.

"An advantage of TIPLINE is that multiple agencies and citizens from any jurisdiction can enter tips into a single database, which can then be accessed for analysis. Officers and citizens can select choices, such as hair color, and also write narratives. Such information is then automatically transferred using a secured server into a database that can then be accessed for analysis. The software can be housed on a standalone computer or a server, which allows for wide usage."

For more information on how to obtain the TIPLINE software and handbook, contact Joey Pomperada of SPAWAR at (843) 218-4528, Joey. pomperada@navy.mil.