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School safety hotline comes to St. John

Students can report crimes

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By Sandra Barbier

One by one, St. John the Baptist Parish public schools are being introduced to a school safety hotline, an offshoot of the Crimestoppers Inc. program that solicits tips and offers rewards to catch criminals.

The Safe School Hotline enables students to report information about crime at school and in their neighborhoods, New Orleans Crimestoppers Executive Director Darlene Cusanza said.

The information is anonymous and is relayed to either law enforcement officials or school officials, depending on the subject, she said.

Modeled after a program in Houston, the hotline was introduced by Crimestoppers four years ago in Orleans Parish public schools. Jefferson Parish began participating about three years ago and the program is currently starting in St. Tammany Parish.

The St. John the Baptist Parish School Board approved a request from schools Superintendent Michael Coburn in September to allow the district's schools to participate.

Riverside Academy in Reserve also is participating, Cusanza said.

Crimestoppers is a citizens' group, she said. "We are just a service that's offered to schools. . . . We do not do any investigation."

Representatives began visiting schools in St. John in January. They have visited East St. John High School, Garyville/Mt. Airy Math and Science Magnet School, West St. John High School and West St. John Elementary School to describe the program to middle and high school students, Cusanza said.

The group will visit John L. Ory Communications Magnet School on Monday, Ory Principal Teri Noel said.

"The school needs to allow us to come in" to tell students how Crimestoppers works, what its mission is and how it maintains students' anonymity, Cusanza said.

The information is protected by law, she said. Callers are given a code number. "We don't know who the caller is," she said.

"In St. John Parish, we send (information) directly to the school principal and we certainly would notify the superintendent. If it is a violation of law, we notify the Sheriff's Office," Cusanza said.

Information can be phoned in toll-free by calling 1 (877) 903-STOP (7867), or reported on the Internet at www.crimestoppersgno.org, Cusanza said.

There are cash rewards ranging from \$25 to \$2,500, depending on the seriousness of the crime and the accuracy of the information, she said.

Cusanza said the group doesn't discuss information from individual schools or parishes, but calls and conversations with students throughout the area show an increase in the abuse of prescription drugs. The drugs include the attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder medicines Ritalin and Adderall. Abuse of tranquilizers Xanax and Valium also is increasing, she said.

"We've actually had calls on bullying" from schools, she said.

Cusanza said students can call the tip lines at any time, but it takes time for the program to catch on in schools.

"It works best where the school is actively involved in promoting it," she said. "The children need to see it, become aware of it . . . and start to trust (it)."

"I think they recognize the number and the service. I think we have a culture of children who are learning they need to get involved," Cusanza said.

East St. John High School Principal Debbie Schum welcomes the program as a new avenue for communication with students.

"I think for the most part, they will come to us (school officials)," she said, but some students might feel better about providing information if they can remain anonymous.

The St. Charles Parish public school district is currently working to rejuvenate the We Tip program, spokeswoman Rochelle Cancienne said. As in Crimestoppers, students will be able to provide tips anonymously, she said.

Their calls will go to a national office that relays information to the St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office, Cancienne said.

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