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Pelham police take text-message tips

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PELHAM – For 350 residents who signed up for the Pelham Police Department's "Citizen Observer" program, it's a chance to become citizen tip-texters as well.

Nearly a year after the Pelham police became first in the state to offer residents a free subscription to the Web-based, "Citizen Observer" e-mail- and text-alert notification system, the department has launched a companion text-a-tip program, known as "Tip411," Police Chief Joseph Roark announced this week.

Tip411 allows anyone with an Internet connection, or text-enabled cell phone to submit a "completely anonymous" tip through the Citizen Observer Web site to Pelham police.

All Tip411 information is confidential, according to Roark, meaning "the tipsters' telephone information is stripped from the system. Their identity cannot even be subpoenaed, as it's not logged on the Citizen Observer system," explained Roark.

Roark expects that Tip411 texters will generate valuable leads for Pelham officers to follow up on regarding illegal drug activities, or other crimes, school bullying, underage drinking parties, and more.

Pelham, which is about to enter the second year of a \$5,000, two-year service contract with Citizen Observer, will not incur any additional charges for adding the TIP411 incoming text capability, Roark said.

The system is already up and running and can be used by texting the word "Pelham" to the six-digit number, 847-411 (Tip411), followed by a message. To submit

a tip by computer, users can log onto www.pelhampolice.com, and click on the "Submit a Tip" icon on the home page.

Citizen Observer is currently used by law-enforcement agencies in 42 states, and many of those are rapidly adding the Tip411 service, according to Dan Zell, Citizen Observer's Tip411 national program manager.

Although critics claim that soliciting totally anonymous text messages makes police departments – and thereby innocent citizens – vulnerable to pranksters, so far in its first year the Tip411 system hasn't been abused by the public, Zell said.

"That is a question (about hoaxes) that comes up 100 percent of the time," said Zell, "and the data we've gathered, informally polled from our Tip411 communities, shows the system just isn't being abused. We know we're going to get some bad information at some point, but we also know that

we're going to get information that we never would've gotten before. So the reward outweighs the risk."

The company's previous data also shows the Pelham police's new capability to get incoming texts will greatly enhance communication with the town's youth population, said Zell.

"Another thing this does is give proactive citizens a tool to make their community safer. A fed-up citizen that's tired of seeing drugs, or other things go on," said Zell.

Tip411 is not to be used as a replacement for reporting emergencies, Roark cautioned. "All life- and property-threatening emergencies should be reported by calling 911," he said.



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