

Funding Pivotal to Drop In Car Theft, Police Say

By Antonio Vasquez
Staff Writer

Metro Detroiters are known for their pursuit of the almighty automobile, which can unfortunately manifest itself sometimes in criminal ways, such as auto theft.

But state and local law enforcement, insurance companies and citizens have united to curb the behavior, and the latest numbers from the Auto Theft Prevention Authority (ATPA) indicate that their efforts might be working.

ATPA reports that between 2001 and 2002, the number of vehicles reported stolen in Michigan dropped from 52,310 vehicles to 49,248 vehicles, a decline of 5.85 percent.

By comparison, auto theft across the country increased by 1.6 percent during the same time period.

In fact, auto theft in Michigan has declined for 14 of the past 16 years, and the latest numbers are the lowest in 25 years, according to Val Vitols, executive director, ATPA.

In the city of Detroit, where

nearly half of all auto thefts occur, numbers dropped from 24,537 vehicles in 2001 to 23,857 vehicles in 2002.

The decline is attributed to the strategic goals of ATPA, a state agency that awards grants to law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and non-profit community organizations dedicated to the identification, investigation and prosecution of auto thieves.

ATPA was formed in the mid-1980s, when Michigan had the highest auto theft rate in the nation.

A governor-appointed, seven-member board, which includes representatives from law enforcement, auto insurers and insurance holders, oversees its operations.

Funded by an annual \$1 assessment on every insured, non-commercial passenger vehicle, in addition to the interest earned through fund investments, ATPA currently manages \$6 million annually across a statewide network that has decreased auto theft in Michigan by 32 percent since 1986.

Auto theft for the same period nationally has increased nearly 2 percent.

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"This significant and consistent reduction has been accomplished through a comprehensive program involving cooperation among all levels of government and the private sector," Vitols wrote in a recent letter to Michigan Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm and the Michigan Legislature.

Lieutenant Sam Carter, who is the Commanding Officer of the Detroit Police Commercial Auto Theft Unit, credits ATPA with providing the funds necessary to maintain a force of 34 undercover officers who focus solely on auto theft in Detroit.

The unit receives three separate ATPA grants totaling approximately \$1.5 million.

The funds pay for salaries, training and development, as well as the costs associated with the purchase and maintenance of vehicles that go beyond unmarked units.

Their vehicles are tough to identify because they range greatly in make and model.

In short, these officers won't be found cruising in the trademark Ford Crown Victoria and Chevy Impala commonly used by law enforcement.

In fact, citing concern over their identities, the officers declined to be photographed for this story.

"We have been very successful, and part of our success has been with the funding from ATPA, because we can hire officers dedicated strictly to auto theft," Carter said.

"Without that funding, if we even had an auto theft unit, it wouldn't be as big as it is now," he added.

Beyond conducting traditional surveillance operations, Carter's squad utilizes a sophisticated computer network that draws on the information collected in their own databases, as well as those maintained by the Michigan Secretary of State.

In doing so, officers can iden-

tify registered and unregistered vehicles, track the transactions of license plates, and monitor the activity of criminals with a past history of auto theft, officials said.

While Carter and his department primarily engage in the identification and apprehension of car thieves, they also consult with Big Three automakers on how to design vehicles that might be less prone to theft.

Certain vehicles are favored for ease of theft or consumer popularity, although Carter says, "no vehicle is exempt, because if there is a market for that part, [auto thieves] know they can get something."

By studying the frequency and targets of vehicle theft, as well as the techniques used to override security systems, Carter can identify patterns and offer consultation to the Big Three automakers.

"When I see a trend coming up, I will call them and notify them," Carter said.

"We're trying to work with automobile manufacturers so that we can inform them of the methods being used to defeat their anti-theft devices," Carter continued.

The decline in vehicle thefts in the city of Detroit is a testament to the dedication of Detroit Police's Commercial Auto Theft Unit, which has contributed to the decline experienced in all of Wayne County since the unit first started receiving ATPA grants in 1987.

Vehicle thefts in Wayne County went from 43,300 vehicles in 1986, to 29,701 vehicles in 2002.

ATPA-funded vehicle theft task forces have also helped fuel declines in other counties during the same time period, with Oakland County thefts dropping from 9,310 vehicles to 3,243 vehicles, and Macomb County thefts from 5,832 vehicles to 2,937 vehicles.

The operation has been so successful, other states look to Michigan as a role model in the fight to curb auto theft.

"We're fortunate to have this program in Michigan. It's been so successful that nine other states have adopted it across the nation," Vitols said.

Major states to adopt ATPA's applications and procedures include Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, New York and Rhode Island.

Vitols also said the state of Colorado "recently adopted the program on a voluntary basis and the state of Utah was having hearings on it."

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Motor Vehicle Thefts

TOP 20 COUNTIES

COUNTY	2001 THEFTS	2002 THEFTS	% CHANGE 2001 - 2002
WAYNE	31,349	29,701	-5
OAKLAND	3,683	3,243	-12
MACOMB	3,038	2,937	-3
GENESEE	3,302	2,392	-28
KENT	1,359	1,336	-2
MUSKEGON	614	1,005	64
KALAMAZOO	804	984	22
WASHTENAW	927	856	-8
SAGINAW	747	640	-14
INGHAM	764	633	-17
CALHOUN	541	534	-1
JACKSON	477	423	-11
BERRIEN	458	407	-11
MONROE	358	333	-7
ST. CLAIR	308	296	-4
OTTAWA	222	274	23
BAY	233	231	-1
LIVINGSTON	202	202	EVEN
VAN BUREN	203	184	-9
MONTCALM	115	138	20
STATE TOTAL	52,310	49,248	-6

VEHICLE THEFT in Metro Detroit is declining more rapidly than the national average. Statewide, the rate has fallen 5.85 percent, versus 1.6-percent nationwide. — graphic by Jennifer Catanzaro

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Reward Money Prompts Callers to Turn in Auto Thieves

Theft Hotline Raises Arrest, Prosecution Rates

By Antonio Vasquez
Staff Writer

The battle against auto theft occurs on many fronts and one way people can join in the fight is by volunteering confidential information that leads to the arrest and prosecution of perpetrators.

Help Eliminate Auto Thefts, or HEAT, is a program that sponsors a toll-free hotline where citizens can provide information specific to auto theft, carjacking, chop shops and auto insurance fraud. The report is completely confidential and the rewards substantial.

Here's how it works:

HEAT joins with Michigan law enforcement agencies to follow up on tips. Administrative operators trained in the confidential nature of filing the report ask callers for the appropriate tip information.

Tips are passed along to the local jurisdiction where the alleged activity takes place. Officers then follow up.

If the tip leads to the arrest and prosecution of a suspected car thief or a person suspected of auto theft-related insurance fraud, the tipster will receive a \$1,000 reward.

Rewards of up to \$10,000 are issued if a tip results in the arrest and binding over for trial of a suspected theft ring or chop shop operation. HEAT also rewards \$2,000 for information leading to the issuance of a warrant for a carjacking suspect.

"Michigan residents are more aware than ever about the need to protect their vehicles from becoming targets for criminals, and law enforcement is more focused than ever on cracking down on theft activity," said Terri Miller, director, HEAT.

"Thanks to resources like the HEAT tip line, Michigan residents are more empowered than ever to report criminal activity and help recover stolen property."

Miller points to the reduction of auto theft in Michigan, as well as the number of reward dollars issued, as proof that the program works.

"HEAT has awarded \$2.6 million to tipsters since 1985, in recovering 3,270 stolen vehicles valued at more than \$38 million. HEAT tips have led to the arrest of 2,684 suspects. We're making a difference," she said in a recent interview.

The program was formed in 1985 by a group of insurance companies who wanted to do something about the high rate of auto theft.

The HEAT hotline is monitored by the Michigan State Police and funded by Michigan

auto insurance companies. In 2003, HEAT received about 600 phone calls, and 25 percent led to a reward payout.

Miller said not every tip leads to a reward because not every call is legitimate.

HEAT sometimes receives tips from people who are on the periphery of a crime ring and leave what Miller refers to as "revenge calls with inaccurate information."

Some cases are closed because police don't receive enough information.

Other times callers are hesitant to provide further information because they think a court appearance is required, which, Miller emphasizes, is not necessary.

Anyone with information regarding auto theft activity or insurance fraud can leave a confidential report with a HEAT operator at (800) 242-HEAT.

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