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Advocates Aim to Pull Plug on Digital Stalkers

By Curtis Krueger

Domestic abusers have found new ways of stalking their victims with high-tech gadgets.

They're installing hidden software to monitor ex-lovers' computers. They're tracking wives' every movement with GPS devices planted on cars. And those are just the tricks that have been discovered.

Now, domestic violence experts are fighting back, devising ways to block this digital spying and seeking new uses of cell phones and computers to make people safer.

A national wireless industry foundation announced Thursday it will grant \$500,000 for training programs around the country designed to teach police, social workers and advocates how to use technology to fight abuse.

"We knew there could be another side of the story, where the technology is used to save lives," said Lynn Rosenthal of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, which has prepared the training methods.

The local impact of the grant won't be huge. It will pay for at least three training sessions in Florida, including one in the Tampa Bay area. But it reflects what experts say is a growing trend of high-tech stalking.

"Unfortunately, criminals can be ingenious about using technology in diabolical ways," Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist said at the announcement Thursday, held at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement offices.

People at risk of being abused need to be aware of the high-tech threat, said Linda Osmundson, executive director of Community Action Stops Abuse in Pinellas County.

Osmundson often encourages battered women to visit her agency's Web site – but not at home. She tells them to use a computer at a public library instead. Otherwise, abusers might discover they are contemplating leaving, which sometimes prompts violent reactions.

“Some abusers are very sophisticated technologically because all kinds of people are abusers,” Osmundson said. This technical know-how gives certain people “a way to be really creepy in their abuse.”

For example:

Police last week arrested 42-year-old Michael Carlson of Colorado Springs, Colo., on suspicion of stalking, harassment and false imprisonment after he was accused of planting a GPS device on the battery of his wife's car. The device allowed her movements to be tracked from a home computer, police said.

Some abusers have used types of “spyware,” computer software that allows one person to check out what another is doing on a computer – what Web sites they visit, even what words they type in messages and e-mail.

“Spyware is one of the worst things to me, because it's so hard to detect,” said Cindy Southworth, director of technology for the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

Nationally, domestic violence each year is responsible for about 2-million injuries and nearly 1,300 deaths among U.S. women ages 18 and older, according to a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Florida had more than 120,000 incidents classified as domestic violence in 2003, ranging from murder to threats and simple assault. But the rate of domestic violence in Florida has been dropping since 1998, according Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics.

Hillsborough County authorities reported more than 10,000 domestic violence incidents in 2003, while Pinellas County officials reported about 8,600. In Pasco, the total was 3,207; in Hernando, 1,367; and in Citrus, 784.

Southworth said police and advocates will be trained to teach potential victims how to use technology to their benefit.

Many police departments and spouse abuse shelters accept donations of old cell phones that can be used by battered women in emergencies. Some cell phones also can be set up to block calls from certain numbers, to prevent harassment.

Or sometimes the opposite technique can help.

Southworth said she knows of a Virginia woman who bought a cell phone and gave the number out to one person: her ex-husband. She soon received hundreds of hang-up calls. A judge was able to document that her ex-husband had been the one harassing her, violating a restraining order.

And while GPS can be misused, it also can help potential victims by making their locations known when they are in danger.

“It’s a fabulous tool. It’s how you harness it,” Southworth said.

The Wireless Foundation, which was established by the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association, is contributing the \$500,000. The Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence will coordinate the training programs in the state.

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