New app helps people to report suspicious activity

By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star   Mar 29, 2018 Updated Mar 29, 2018

WINCHESTER — A new, free app is intended to help people aid law enforcement as it works to eliminate threats of criminal activity and terrorism.

The "See Something, Send Something" app is available for Android and Apple devices like iPhone and iPad.

The Clarke County Sheriff's Office and Frederick County Sheriff's Office are among the local agencies using social media to promote the new app.

"We are trying to make options available for sharing information without being obvious or obtrusive," said Clarke County Sheriff Tony Roper. "There is information that law enforcement should get without invading people's privacy or putting anyone in harm's way."

The Virginia State Police has posted a video on YouTube that shows how the "See Something, Send Something" app is intended to be used.

In the tutorial video, a mother is walking down a street with her young children. She notices a man in an alley, taking a photo of a surveillance camera and depositing a backpack. She discreetly takes a photo of the man using the "See Something, Send Something" app.

That image becomes part of a state and federal database.

"This is simply another tool in the law enforcement tool box," said Frederick County Sheriff Lenny Millholland. "For a long time, I've said, 'If you see something, say something.' We will always encourage people to call 540-662-6162 if they see something suspicious."

Like Millholland, Roper emphasized the app does not replace calling 911 in emergency situations or calling Clarke County's communication center at 540-955-1234 with nonemergency concerns.

"Sending an image with this app does not mean there will be an immediate response from law enforcement," he said. "This app is not manned 27/7. It adds data. It does not dispatch law enforcement."

The Virginia State Police Fusion Center site — vsp.state.va.us/FusionCenter — has a link to the "See Something, Send Something" app. It also includes information about how to identify potential signs of terrorism.

The Fusion Center, which was created after 9/11, is a collaboration of local, state and federal agencies. The goal is to share resources, expertise and information to better identify, detect, prevent and respond to terrorist and criminal activity.

"People at the Fusion Center download images," Millholland explained. "If they see a few or five or 10 images of suspicious activity at one location, they'll notify the law enforcement agency there."

According to the "See Something, Send Something" website — seeandsend.info — the technology is a citizen empowerment app.

Residents are also sometimes asked to help law enforcement via social media.
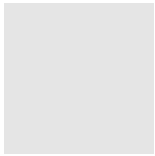
Increasingly, law enforcement agencies post images and videos on social media in an effort to gather additional information from the public. In those instances, Roper said, "We know the source of the images, and we are relatively certain of their legitimacy."

Millholland said, "As sheriffs, we'd rather have an informed community."
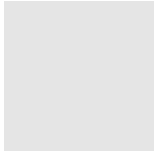
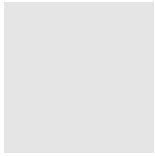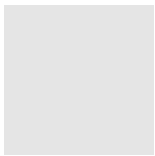— Contact Cathy Kuehner at ckuehner@winchesterstar.com

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