Automated System Assists Stolen Property Investigations

By Michele Coppola

Police in Vancouver, Wash., are counting on an automated database system to help significantly reduce and solve incidents of stolen property.

The Vancouver Police Department began using the Regional Automated Property Information Database (RAPID) in 2012 to monitor items coming into the city’s five pawn shops, according to Commander Dave King of the department’s Technical Services Division. In 2013, the city plans to extend the program to apply to other secondhand dealer establishments.

“It’s not the pawn shops that are killing us; it’s other secondhand dealers,” King says. “We probably have between 100 to 200 places in Vancouver where you can sell goods, such as gold kiosks, and no rules apply to them, which is why we are updating our ordinance to cover for-profit secondhand dealers for any kind of merchandise. Nonprofit groups such as Goodwill will not be affected by the ordinance.”

In the Northwest, the RAPID system is owned by the Portland Police Bureau in Portland, Ore. Vancouver, with a population of 170,000, is part of the Portland metropolitan area. At present, nearly all 35 law enforcement agencies in Washington and Oregon that comprise the metropolitan area are expected to be signed on and using the shared, regional RAPID system, according to King.

King discussed the RAPID system at the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Fall 2012 Technology Institute for Law Enforcement. The RAPID system, which uses software developed by Business Watch International, was designed to handle pawn, secondhand and metal recycling dealer transactions in an attempt to track stolen property. The program also has the ability to track vehicles sold to automotive dismantlers. It serves as a central repository for all transaction data and allows an investigator to search online for a suspect or stolen item. The system also searches through the FBI’s National Crime Information Center database, and is currently linked to the Washington and Oregon databases. Access to RAPID requires a username and password.

“The nice thing about the system is a patrol officer can query the system at any time and does not have to depend on a detective to provide the information, and searches can be very specific,” King says. “As resources diminish, we have seen a reduction in our detective unit and crimes against persons usually take precedence over property crimes. This technology can be used to leverage limited resources.”

If a search does not produce a particular suspect or item, investigators can save the search and RAPID can notify them via email, pager or text message if it detects the suspect or item in the future.

RAPID Successes

Since it began using the Regional Automated Property Information Database (RAPID) in the fall of 2009, Maryland has had a number of investigative successes. Examples include:

- The Baltimore Police Department used RAPID to investigate a commercial burglary, resulting in three arrests and the recovery of $2.5 million in stolen scrap metal.
- The St. Mary’s County Sheriff’s Office and the Maryland State Police used RAPID to identify two suspects selling large amounts of jewelry, some of which was linked to a burglary. The investigation led to the arrest of two suspects, the closure of two additional burglaries and the recovery of $13,750.
- In Baltimore, RAPID helped police solve a homicide. Investigators asked their pawn unit to query RAPID to determine if property stolen from the victim had been sold. The property turned up in RAPID and the seller was arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

Continued on page 2
The system includes a dealer entry screen. Depending on the law in a jurisdiction, the retailer must enter certain types of information into the database, such as the seller’s name, thumbprint, driver’s license number, physical description and a photo of the seller, and a photo and detailed description of the item and serial numbers. RAPID receives dealer transactions either by the direct real-time entry of the data by the dealer or a daily upload. Also important is that dealers appreciate the level playing field and that everyone is held to the same standards.

If an agency chooses, it can also activate and use sex offender, computer LoJack and SIRAS matching functions in RAPID. SIRAS is used by retailers to identify and track their serialized products and deter theft.

Beginning in October 2009, Maryland has adopted state laws that require the use of RAPID for reporting all pawn, second-hand, precious metal and scrap metal recycling transactions. In 2012 in Maryland, the system, which is managed by the Maryland State Police, helped lead to 1,322 arrests, 2,192 cases closed and the recovery of $4.8 million in stolen property. Since 2009, the system has helped lead to 3,588 cases closed, 2,453 arrests and the recovery of more than $13.2 million in stolen property.

Other states with jurisdictions participating in RAPID include California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Virginia.

“The fact that it is a regional database is huge,” King says. “To me, it’s the threat of apprehension that keeps some would-be crooks honest. It will be harder for them to steal and sell stolen property in our jurisdiction. I anticipate a reduction in property crimes once we get it fully implemented.”

Rapid Successes (continued)

- In Frederick, the sheriff’s pawn unit used RAPID to arrest an Arizona man wanted for manufacturing and selling more than $70,000 in fake gold and who had committed $10,000 worth of the same fraud in Maryland.
- A husband and wife were arrested in Howard County for a series of burglaries after the woman stole a 1971 high school ring. Investigators entered the ring into the RAPID database, leading to the couple’s arrest and the recovery of $4,000 in jewelry.
- In 2012, Maryland dealers notified law enforcement three different times that they suffered losses due to being sold fake gold jewelry. Bulletins were sent to all law enforcement agencies and dealers. Good communication between law enforcement and dealers resulted in warrants for some of the sellers and no more financial losses to the dealers.

Sources: Regional Automated Property Information Database Fact Sheet, Governor’s Office of Crime Control and Prevention, January 2012 and RAPID-2011 Year in Review, Maryland State Police, January 2012.

For more information on RAPID, contact Commander Dave King of the Vancouver Police Department at dave.king@cityofvancouver.us; Brent Bates of the Portland Police Department at brent.bates@portlandregon.gov; Maureen Walter of the Maryland State Police at maureen.walter@maryland.gov; or Capt. Dalaine Brady of the Maryland State Police at dalaine.brady@maryland.gov. For information on the NIJ Technology Institutes for Law Enforcement, contact Law Enforcement Program Manager Michael O’Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.

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