

Newsletter

PA Auto Theft Prevention Authority Newsletter



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Message from the Executive Director



Michelle L. Staton, Executive Director

In this issue we welcome our newest Board Member, Celeste Dodson. Ms. Dodson is an Operations Manager at State Farm Insurance Company and has extensive auto theft prevention experience. We are very excited to have her join the effort in PA and look forward to working with her.

Also in this issue, we highlight instances of auto theft that took a violent turn. As reported by state and national media, stolen vehicle pursuits have led to serious traffic violence and loss of life. These extreme cases reinforce the need for all motorists to take an active role in protecting their vehicles as some of the thefts setting off these chain reactions of violence start as preventable crimes of opportunity - vehicles that were left running unattended with keys in the ignition.

Please be sure to check out our "Mark Your Calendar" section for upcoming free VINgraving events. VINgraving is the process of chemically etching your unique vehicle identification number on all of your vehicle's windows as another layer of protection against auto vehicle theft. The ATPA provides VINgraving free to the public. It is a service that could cost hundreds if done elsewhere. Encourage friends and family to take advantage of our free events. An event listing can be found [here](#).

The ATPA observed that hot summer temperatures cause motorists to increase behaviors that put themselves at risk of becoming a victim of auto theft. In a series of public awareness campaigns in the Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Harrisburg regions, the ATPA spent the summer educating road-tripping families that leaving valuables like GPS systems, luggage and portable DVD players in plain sight could make their vehicle a target for auto theft. Likewise, busy commuters were cautioned that leaving windows rolled down or engines on to keep the AC running while getting a cup of coffee, paying for gas or using an ATM attracts auto thieves. It takes three minutes to run into a convenience store, but only three seconds to steal a running vehicle!

As the hot days of summer give way to cool fall temperatures, take time to consider that auto

thieves do not hibernate - you must always take steps to protect your vehicle. Click [here](#) for our list of 50 ways to protect your vehicle.

Sincerely,



Michelle L. Staton, Executive Director

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ATPA Welcomes Newest Board Member

In July 2009, Celeste C. Dodson was certified by the office of Governor Edward G. Rendell as the ATPA's newest Board Member. Ms. Dodson replaces longtime Board Member Ronald L. Price who retired in June from State Farm Insurance and his position on the ATPA Board.

As an Operations Manager at State Farm, Ms. Dodson leads the Pennsylvania Auto Underwriting Department and Market Insights Team. She is responsible for auto trend and risk analysis, as well as rate and policy adjustments.

Ms. Dodson joins the ATPA with extensive professional experience related to auto theft prevention. Most significantly, she served as Chair of the Maryland/DC Anti-Car Theft Committee from 2000 to 2004. During her service to the MD/DC ACT Committee, she worked to increase public awareness of auto theft and foster insurance SIU personnel and police collaboration. Additionally, she lobbied the insurance industry to support the voluntarily funded ACT Committee. In this role, she increased her peers' awareness of auto theft-related issues and advocated for the resources needed for law enforcement to effectively combat and prevent theft.

Beyond her work with the MD/DC ACT Committee, Ms. Dodson also served as a member of the MD Vehicle Theft Prevention Council and the DC Towing Committee.

Insurance industry representation on the ATPA Board of Directors is important because there is a definite link between auto theft and insurance premiums, Ms. Dodson believes. Theoretically, as losses increase, rates increase.

While she doesn't have personal experience as a victim of auto theft, Ms. Dodson looks forward to serving as an ATPA Board Member and will provide valuable insight from her professional experiences. Likewise, she hopes to learn more about the connection between the insurance industry, law enforcement, auto crime and the effect it has on Pennsylvania's insured drivers.



Celeste Dodson, Operations Manager, State Farm

Mark Your Calendar

Free VINgraving Events

October 3, 2009

Marcus Hook Safety Day, Market Square Park, Delaware Ave., Marcus Hook, 10:00AM - 1:00PM, Rain Date: 10/9/2009



October 7, 2009

AAA State College, 9:00AM - 3:30PM, Rain Date: 10/9/2009

October 9, 2009

AAA Northeastern Safety Fair/Car Check Day, Nay Aug Park, Scranton, 10:00AM - 2:00PM

October 21, 2009

AAA York, 9:00AM - 3:30PM, Rain Date: 10/23/2009

November 11, 2009

AAA Hanover, 9:00AM - 3:30PM, Rain Date: 11/13/2009

Can't make it to an event? Order a FREE do-it-yourself VINgraving kit [here](#).

ATPA Grantee Conference

October 28-29, 2009

Motorcycle & ATV Identification, Heritage Hills, York

NE-IAATI, NC-IAATI & Ohio Auto Theft Investigators Association Joint Annual Training Seminar

May 10-13, 2009

Cleveland, Ohio - For more information, click [here](#).

Auto Thefts Lead to Traffic Violence

The ATPA has long cautioned that auto thefts can quickly turn violent. State and national media outlets have been reporting, with increasing frequency, cases that begin with the theft of a vehicle and lead to more violent offenses. It appears that thieves are feeling the pressure of coordinated police efforts and are succumbing to acts of desperation to evade the law.

In Allentown, local newspapers reported that a New Jersey man led police on a chase in a stolen vehicle. In an attempt to escape arrest, the suspect ran 39 stop signs and/or lights before crashing into another vehicle. The crash victim suffered serious injuries and died the following day. The suspect, who was initially charged by the Lehigh County Auto Theft Task

Force with receiving stolen property, unauthorized use of a vehicle, fleeing police, reckless and careless driving and driving an unregistered vehicle, among other charges, now faces homicide and assault charges.

A similar incident transpired in Baltimore, Maryland, when a woman was killed after her vehicle was hit by a man fleeing the Baltimore Regional Auto Theft Task Force. Local newspapers and media outlets throughout Pennsylvania and beyond reported that the suspect had stolen the vehicle by armed carjacking - a violent act in and of itself.

In Philadelphia, it was reported that two men stole a motorcycle. After the theft, one man fled on the motorcycle and the other in a car. After the theft was reported, police spotted and pursued the suspect in the car. Tragically, the suspect veered off the road and jumped a curb, slamming into the front steps of a home. A mother and her three children, who were sitting on the steps, were struck by the vehicle. All three children were killed.

In western Pennsylvania, two teenagers stole a vehicle and led police on an 18-mile chase. The Mount Pleasant Journal, published in Westmoreland City, PA, reported that the chase involved a dozen police cars. One officer was quoted saying, "At one point, I looked at my speedometer and I was going about 120." Police had to strike the teens' vehicle in order to stop them.

The Wall Street Journal reported that a stolen vehicle fleeing from police hit a pickup truck near San Francisco, California. In total, four children and three adults were killed.

Motorists should know that law enforcement agencies throughout Pennsylvania are working hard to stop the violence associated with auto theft. Additionally, motorists should be motivated by these stories to take an active role in protecting their vehicle and preventing auto theft. Some of the thefts that set off these chain reactions of violence start as preventable crimes of opportunity - vehicles that were left running unattended with the keys in the ignition. For a list of 50 tips to protect your car, click [here](#).

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In the News

Tow truck driver arrested in car-theft scheme

A tow truck driver involved in a scheme to lure drivers into a parking lot and then illegally tow their cars - at least 90 of them - was arrested. The suspect was stopped by police for a traffic violation and arrested on a warrant for organized scheme to defraud and auto theft.

His alleged counterparts were arrested after a three-month investigation.

The suspects would use a parking lot without the permission from the owner and post towing signs on the property. The suspects then took down the signs, waited for motorists to park in the lot, towed the cars and then replaced the signs.

South Florida Sun-Sentinel, Boynton Beach, Florida

100 car break-ins

Scott Thomas Heffelfinger, of Franklin Township, was a busy man in July. That's what police are alleging. Leighton Chief of Police said Heffelfinger has admitted to breaking into 75 to 100 vehicles.

Heffelfinger was arraigned for about half those break-ins. He also was arraigned on a count that he stole one of the vehicles he entered in Leighton. He was charged with theft of a motor vehicle and receiving stolen property. The vehicle he stole reportedly was unlocked.

The Times News, Lehigh, Pennsylvania

\$26,000 in car parts stolen from dealership

Thieves stole 26 catalytic converters from new automobiles for sale on the lot at Piazza Honda. The theft of parts from 25 Honda CRVs and a Honda Element was reported to Limerick Township Police.

"The theft of parts is costly," Limerick Sgt. Pual Marchese said. He said Piazza Honda representatives estimated the cost of each part at \$1,000, with a total loss of about \$26,000. Although the parts would be worth more if sold as actual parts, it's possible the parts could be sold for scrap, but then they'd only fetch about \$10 or \$20 each, police said.

The Mercury, Pottstown, Pennsylvania

Motorcycle thieves using stolen minivans

Thieves have a new tactic for taking motorcycles: hauling them off in stolen minivans. Thieves targeted minivans, stealing them or attempting to steal them, police said. Investigators with the Regional Auto Theft Task Force said that if a thief can't easily disable a lock and take a motorcycle, they'll often steal a minivan, haul the bike away and remove the chains or locks elsewhere.

Police offered tips to prevent motorcycle theft, including using an alarm or tracking device.

The Sun, Baltimore, Maryland

Car theft 'Catch 22'

When Neil's car was stolen, he found himself not only the victim of a crime, but also the victim of a "Catch 22" situation. Neil's gray 1997 Honda Civic was stolen in Allentown while he was at a friend's house watching television. He reported the theft to Allentown Police immediately.

The first time Neil saw his car, after it had been recovered by the Lehigh County Auto Theft Task Force, it was clear that it had been thoroughly stripped. The doors and the back hatch were gone. The bumpers were missing. His license plate was gone. And his wheels had been replaced with three old wheels and mismatched tires. The thief took the car jack, too.

As if being a victim wasn't enough, he experienced problems when trying to have the vehicle towed and when he tried to order a new license plate.

Northampton Press, Allentown, Pennsylvania

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Lehigh & Berks County Officials Announce LoJack Expansion

LoJack stolen vehicle recovery systems boast a 90% recovery rate and now residents in Berks, Lehigh and Northampton counties can benefit from this technology. At a press conference on September 16, 2009, ATPA Executive Director, Michelle Staton, Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin and Berks County District Attorney John Adams announced the expansion of LoJack coverage to the Lehigh Valley.



LoJack was launched in Philadelphia in 1997 and was later expanded to Bucks and Montgomery counties. Now, more than 15 police departments in the Lehigh Valley and more than 50 agencies in Pennsylvania are equipped with LoJack Police Tracking Computers.

Lehigh County District Attorney Martin announced that, "Since April, when the tracking computers were installed in six Lehigh County Auto Theft Task Force vehicles, the task force has recovered or has assisted in recovering four stolen vehicles. One vehicle was located within hours of being stolen." Berks County District Attorney Adams also shared a recovery success story where a vehicle was stolen in Berks County, and because of the tracking unit installed in the vehicle, it was recovered a few hours later within Berks County.

Staton commented that, "LoJack is an added layer of protection from auto theft. Stolen vehicle recovery systems, like LoJack, are a smart choice because they make your vehicle more likely to be recovered if it is stolen."

After the press conference, officers with the Berks-Lehigh Regional Police conducted demonstrations of the LoJack technology. Members of the media were able to ride along with the officers as they tracked a mock stolen vehicle.

The ATPA advocates that all motorists consider investing in an after market auto theft prevention or stolen vehicle recovery device as another layer of protecting against auto theft. Click [here](#) for a list of effective auto theft prevention devices.

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- Delaware County District Attorney's Office
- Good Shepherd Mediation Program
- Harrisburg Bureau of Police
- Lancaster City Police
- Lehigh County District Attorney's Office
- Northeast Regional Task Force
- Pennsylvania State Police Auto Theft Units (Western, Central and Eastern)
- Philadelphia District Attorney's Office
- Philadelphia Police Department
- Pittsburgh Police Department

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