ISSUE 2

theAUTHORITY

PENNSYLVANIA AUTO THEFT PREVENTION AUTHORITY

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Reading Takes Charge

Reading Mayor Thomas McMahon takes auto theft seriously—and with good reason. In 2006, Reading's auto-theft rates were off the charts. Last fall, Kansas-based Morgan Quinto Press ranked Reading as the 21st most dangerous city in the nation and the worst in Pennsylvania. That is not a ranking the mayor is proud of, and as a result, he has expressed his commitment to cracking down on crime.

Several months ago, the Mayor formed a vehicle theft task force that meets monthly to discuss the auto-theft problem and ways to combat it with the ATPA, members from the Reading City Police Department, PA State Police and Berks County Crime Watch.

One of the areas of increased concern is the juvenile auto-theft problem in the city. To understand and address juvenile auto-theft, the ATPA teamed with Mayor McMahon to host an auto-theft summit in March. The summit was held in Reading with members from the Reading School District, Berks County Juvenile Court system, Berks County District Attorney's Office and Berks County Juvenile Probation

Department. As part of the meeting, representatives from the Good Shepherd Mediation Program (an ATPA grantee) made a presentation about the juvenile diversion program in Philadelphia. Good Shepherd's presence at the meeting inspired discussion between the attendees on how a similar program in Reading City may impact the juvenile auto-theft problem. Members from the Juvenile Offender Initiative of the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office also made a presentation to the group and discussed how their office interacts with Good Shepherd to address juvenile auto theft in the City of Philadelphia.

Reading continued on Pg. 3

Message from the Chair

Summer is here and now is the perfect time to think about our cars – and the simple things we can do to keep them safe from thieves, especially as many of us head out for our vacations. For many thieves, auto theft is a crime of opportunity. If you follow the basic tips for auto theft prevention, the thief will likely move on to the next car. We at the Pennsylvania Auto Theft Prevention Authority have spent the first half of 2007 reminding drivers of the simple things they can do to keep their cars — and themselves — safer. Here are some of our easiest and most effective tips: Lock your car and take your keys. If your car has an alarm or steering wheel lock, use it. Keep valuables out of sight. Get your car VIN-Etched. Most of these things take only a few seconds, but can go a long way in protecting your vehicle.

In January, the Authority launched a "Lock It or Lose It" media campaign, asking the press to help us remind drivers to turn off their engines and lock their cars when they walk away – even if only for a few moments. Leaving a car running unattended is a relatively common practice, especially during the winter and summer months when drivers want to keep the heat or air conditioning going while they run a quick errand. Trust me, the feeling you get when your car is stolen is much more uncomfortable than being cold or warm for a few minutes!

In February, the Authority continued the campaign by holding a "Lock It or Lose It" event in the Harrisburg area to remind drivers about the danger of leaving their cars running unattended. During our event, which you can read more about on page 4, we observed two drivers pull up to the convenience store and go inside while their vehicles idled outside. Our grantees gave them a friendly safety reminder. Luckily, the only "thief" on-site that day was a police officer acting the part for the event.

In April, the Authority kicked off its annual itinerary of VIN-Etch events with a busy day at the Neshaminy Mall in Bensalem. More than 300 drivers showed up, and the local media helped us spread the word about this important initiative. Events in Reading and Harrisburg also proved successful, with drivers lining up to have their Vehicle Identification Number etched onto all of their auto glass as a theft deterrent.

As you embark on your summer journeys near and far, be smart and stay safe.

Sincerely,

Julia K. Hearthway
Chair, Auto Theft Prevention Authority

Board of Directors

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Vice President, Public and Government Affairs
AAA Mid Atlantic Insurance Group

Col. Jeffrey B. Miller
Commissioner
Pennsylvania State Police

VINgraving Success Continues

The VINgraving campaign continues to be a successful way for the ATPA to help consumers protect themselves against auto theft. Our annual ABC 27-sponsored event at the Capital City Mall near Harrisburg has become quite an attraction for local vehicle owners, who lined up well before the 10 a.m. start time on Saturday, May 5.

ABC 27's consumer reporter Dennis Buterbaugh promoted the event on-air throughout the week and was on-site to speak with consumers and thank them for coming to the event. In all, the VINgraving team, which included volunteers from the ATPA, Cumberland County District Attorney's Office, PA State Police, Harrisburg Police, Lower Allen Township Police, Erie Insurance and State Farm Insurance, etched 270 cars in a four-hour period.

Other recent VINgraving activities included an April 21 etching at the Neshaminy Mall in Bensalem, as well as a May 19 event at the Fairgrounds Square Mall in Reading, where the ATPA offered a free Club-brand anti-theft device to owners of Reading's Top 10 most-stolen vehicles, provided they got their cars etched, of course!

Get your VINgraving kit today at www.watchyourcar.org

Reading continued from Front Page

In addition, Judge Grimm in Berks County has recently ordered that any juvenile arrested for auto theft must be detained for 72 hours. This is a major step in the right direction to fight the juvenile auto-theft problem, and we are already seeing the benefits of his crime-fighting initiative.

Now, any juvenile arrested for auto theft is automatically detained. For many would-be juvenile auto thieves, that is not a price they're willing to pay.

Further efforts include a decal program designed and instituted to help law enforcement officers identify and recover stolen vehicles not normally driven at unusual hours by their owners. A decal is applied to the inside of one of the vehicle's rear windows and the vehicle owner signs a consent form agreeing that any law enforcement official has the right to stop that vehicle and ask for identification. The agreed-upon hours occur from 12 a.m. to 6 a.m.

In May, Reading partnered with the Authority to host a VINgraving event at the Fairgrounds Square Mall in Muhlenberg Township. Volunteers etched almost 200 cars, and the Authority distributed free Club-brand steering wheel locking devices to drivers. In addition, Reading law enforcement registered drivers for the decal program.

So far, the increased effort in Reading is paying off. Historically, Reading averaged 100 reported thefts per month. In 2007, the average number of cases has dropped below 40! Our hats go off to the concentrated effort in the city to reduce auto theft.

‘Lock It or Lose It’ Returns

The Authority’s “Lock It or Lose It” mock auto-theft initiative returned this past winter with an event in Central Pennsylvania.

The Authority’s “Lock It or Lose It” mock auto-theft initiative returned this past winter with an event in Central Pennsylvania. The ATPA, Cumberland County Auto Theft Task Force and Mechanicsburg Police hosted the event on February 27 at the Sun Up Market in Mechanicsburg Borough.

Media coverage is essential to publicizing the mock auto theft and the important message behind it—never leave your car running unattended, even if you’re just doing a quick dash into a convenience store. It takes as little as 10 seconds for a thief to steal a running vehicle. Journalists from three local television stations and two newspapers were on the scene to interview Michelle Staton and ATPA grantee Earl Bock of the Cumberland County District Attorney’s Office’s Auto Theft Task Force.

And if we needed proof that the event was needed, as the cameras were rolling, two different customers pulled in and left their cars running while they shopped. Talk about proof that “Lock It or Lose It” is a necessary initiative! Our on-site law enforcement officers enjoyed speaking with the drivers and showing them our bright yellow and black “Lock It or Lose It” stickers. We hope the drivers learned their lesson!

Each May, the U.S. Fire Administration holds "Arson Awareness Week." This year's week, held May 6-12, focused on bringing public attention to vehicle arson, which accounts for roughly 20 percent of all arsons in the United States.

National Awareness Spotlights Auto Arson

According to data from the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association, in 2004 36,000 intentionally set vehicle fires occurred, an increase of 18 percent from the previous year. The reasons for vehicle arson vary. Not only are vehicles set ablaze by auto thieves trying to destroy evidence, but also by people trying to get out of costly auto leases.

Insurance companies are faced with the unfortunate fact that car owners have been known to set their own vehicles on fire to avoid their payments, yet origin-and-cause investigations are costly and time-consuming. Therefore, most insurance companies tend to pay the claim and look the other way. The loser in all this is the driving public, as insurance premiums increase overall when crimes such as vehicle arson occur.

The following basic auto-theft prevention practices can reduce your chances of becoming a victim of auto theft and possibly auto arson:

- Park your car in a well-lit area
- Use a secure parking lot for extended periods
- Close all windows
- Remove the key from the ignition
- Always lock doors, trunk and tailgate
- Use anti-theft devices
- Report abandoned cars to the police

Source: U.S. Fire Administration

In the News

Pittsburgh-Area Investigation Yields Big Bounty

A Cranberry Township detective was called to assist in the identification of a vehicle at Malone's Radiator Shop in Cranberry. When the detective arrived at the shop, he learned there were several cars needing identification and he called for backup. Three other officers responded, and by the next day, the officers had recovered 27 stolen vehicles and locked the property for seizure.

During the investigation, officers arrested 16 targets and seized property valued at $500,000. During the course of this investigation, officers learned that one of the targets also stole more than $100,000 in parts and cash from his the auto parts store where he worked. That money allegedly helped fund the chop-shop and the extravagant lifestyle of the primary targets, which included prescription drug abuse, major sporting events and racing event competition.

PA State Police Auto Theft Unit, Western Region

Extended Joyride Ends In Arrests

Three teenage boys stole a car in Reading and used it to get around for nearly two weeks, with the youngest of the boys — a 13-year-old — doing the driving, police said.

The boys even put gas in the car, a 1997 Lexus valued at $5,000, and dug it out after a February snow and ice storm, police said.

But their luck ran out when a city policeman spotted the car. The boys — ages 13, 14 and 16 — were arrested when they returned to the car, which was being watched by members of the local auto theft task force, police said.

The youths were detained and await hearings before juvenile authorities on theft and conspiracy charges.

The Reading Eagle

Man Ships Cars Overseas, Ships Out to Prison

Federal agents arrested a Southwest Philadelphia man on February 22 and charged him with attempting to transport stolen vehicles to Nigeria. The suspect is accused of attempting to transport seven stolen vehicles in overseas containers to Nigeria on Dec. 19 and six stolen vehicles to Nigeria on Jan. 19.

According to an affidavit, at least some of the cars were part of an insurance fraud scheme in which the owners voluntarily allowed their cars to be stolen so they could make fraudulent insurance claims.

The stolen vehicles included Toyota Camrys, Honda Accords, Hyundai Sonatas, a Nissan Maxima, a Cadillac Escalade and an Acura CL, most of them 2002-2006 models from Delaware and Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia Auto Squad/The Philadelphia Inquirer

Suspect Gets Stiff Sentence in Mall Carjacking

On the rainy afternoon of Sept. 14, 2006, Ferlanda O'Neil Thomas carjacked a woman at knifepoint outside the JCPenney store at the Lehigh Valley Mall in Allentown. The victim alleged that Thomas sexually assaulted her as they drove east on Route 22. The victim, fearing for her life, jumped out as the vehicle sped along Route 33.

The woman was found sitting on the rumble strip of the southbound lane of Route 33 in Bethlehem Township, half naked, bloody and incoherent, just minutes after jumping out of the passenger door of her speeding sport utility vehicle. Thomas was captured two days later in Mississippi.

In April, Thomas, 23, was sentenced to 20 years in prison on a federal carjacking charge. U.S. District Judge Thomas M. Golden went above the maximum federal sentencing guidelines, adding 30 months for what he described as an "appalling" crime.

Thomas, who pleaded guilty in December to one count of aggravated carjacking, and still faces state charges that include robbery and kidnapping, was also sentenced to five years of supervised release.

Lehigh County District Attorney's Office/Allentown Morning Call

Chop Shop Ring Busted

On Feb. 12, Attorney General Tom Corbett announced officials had charged five suspects accused of operating a Lancaster County motorcycle chop-shop ring, which specialized in stamping new vehicle identification numbers (VINs) onto stolen motorcycles.

Corbett identified the alleged leader of the chop-shop as Colin David Campbell, who owned and operated a licensed used car dealership out of his residential property in Manheim.

Campbell allegedly acquired salvaged motorcycles for reconstruction, as well as stolen motorcycles, which were used to reconstruct the salvaged pieces. He allegedly used the car dealership on his property as a cover for the operation. Agents estimate that between 2000 and 2005, VINs from salvaged motorcycles were transferred to approximately 12 stolen motorcycles per year.

Corbett explained that in addition to running the chop-shop, Campbell also allegedly filed two fraudulent insurance claims based on an alleged burglary of his Manheim residence in October 2003 and collected $124,188 for both claims.

PA Attorney General's Office

Bad Parking Job

A Clarion County woman, who apparently used a stolen car to get to a state police barracks to be fingerprinted for a civilian job, was arrested on an outstanding warrant from Georgia. State police in Clarion said the woman had been sought in Georgia for stealing that car.

After fingerprinting the woman, officials learned of the warrant and arrested her. They then found the stolen vehicle in the parking lot of the barracks.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ATPA Director Brings Home Industry Honor

Congratulations to the ATPA's Executive Director, Michelle Staton, for garnering well-deserved recognition at the 2007 conference of the Northeast Chapter of the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators (IAATI), which was held during the third week in May in Manchester, NH.

Michelle was honored with the Anthony M. Kane Achievement Award, which is named for the late Tony Kane, a Philadelphia police officer and National Insurance Crime Bureau investigator.

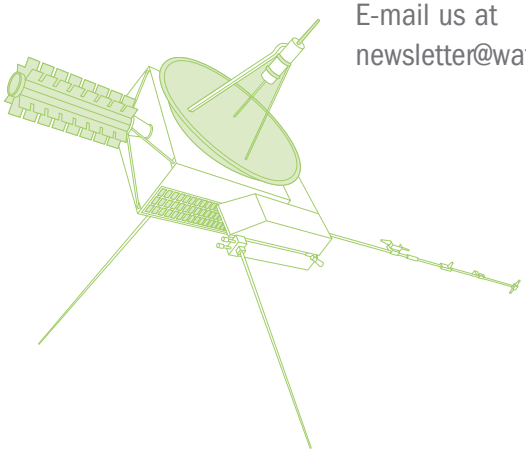
The recipients are selected based on their outstanding achievement in the field of vehicle theft or fraud investigation or prevention. Michelle's work has helped make the ATPA one of the Nation's most successful auto-theft prevention associations in terms of reducing auto crimes. From coordinating activities with law enforcement organizations and industry associations to budgeting and documenting statistics and results, there isn't much she doesn't do. Nice work, Michelle!

THE AUTHORITY'S GRANTEES

- Allegheny County District Attorney's Office
- Cumberland County District Attorney's Office
- Delaware County District Attorney's Office
- Erie Bureau of Police
- Good Shepherd Mediation Program
- Harrisburg Bureau of Police
- Lancaster City Police
- Lehigh County District Attorney's Office
- Northeast Regional Task Force of Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Anti-Car Theft Committee (PACT)
- Pennsylvania State Police Auto Theft Unit (Central Region)
- Pennsylvania State Police Auto Theft Unit (Eastern Region)
- Pennsylvania State Police Auto Theft Unit (Western Region)
- Philadelphia District Attorney's Office
- Philadelphia Police Department
- Pittsburgh Police Department Auto Squad
- York County District Attorney's Office

We're going electronic.

The ATPA is considering issuing our newsletter electronically in the near future. Interested in saving a tree? E-mail us at newsletter@watchyourcar.org



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