

## **2008 Vehicle Theft Award of Merit**

### **Agency (251-1,000 Officers) Recognition: Plano, Texas, Police Department, of which Gregory W. Rushin is the Chief**

The Plano, Texas, Police Department exerted department-wide efforts during 2007 to increase the awareness of citizens to various aspects of vehicle theft and prevention and to implement, as well, enforcement strategies that resulted in the reduction of vehicle thefts by 26 percent, from 533 in 2006, to 392 in 2007.

Plano's approach included:

- Aside from investigating vehicle-theft and unauthorized-vehicle-use, the Auto Theft Unit within the Criminal Investigative Services Division e-mailed officers about theft trends, suspects, and recommended changes in legislation that had been enacted into law; developed—in conjunction with the Crime Analysis Unit—and issued officers “crime bulletins” containing suspect photos and vehicles; and met monthly with neighboring jurisdictions to exchange information on trends, suspects, and chop-shops.
- “Hot Sheet,” a Records Management System database, permitted officers to print listings of stolen vehicles—including makes; models; and registration plate, VIN and NCIC numbers—that allow them to have at their fingertips while on patrol accurate and timely information upon which to act.
- Nine Patrol Division vehicles are LoJack-equipped. As part of a comprehensive agency policy, those vehicles are mandated to be utilized on all shifts in the sectors to which they are assigned. Both classroom and practical training are included in the entrance-level curriculum, and proficiency testing is conducted throughout each year.
- Police explorers and public safety officers VIN-etched 137 vehicles and distributed “50 Ways to Watch Your Car” brochures.
- Officers promoted Texas’ H.E.A.T. [Help End Auto Theft] program whereby police officers may stop, between 1:00 A.M. and 5:00 A.M., vehicles participating in this program to verify ownership.
- Sky Watch towers were employed in large parking lots where vehicle thefts occurred, both as deterrents and as evidence-gatherers.
- Detectives and crime prevention officers educated auto dealerships on improved means by which to secure vehicles’ keys and to otherwise reduce thefts of for-sale vehicles.

### **Agency (1,001+ Officers) Recognition: Mesa, Arizona, Police Department, of which George Gascón is the Chief**

The Mesa, Arizona, Police Department recognizes that quality policing is dynamic and requires change to meet challenges. Its internal and external

programs in 2007 succeeded in providing more opportunities to educate the public that its employees serve and in reducing vehicle thefts 25 percent, from 3,594 in 2006, to 2,708 in 2007. While arrests declined 30 percent, and recoveries fell 27 percent last year, the Police Department is continuing in 2008 to address this problem by doubling the number of “bait cars” and by quintupling the number of License Plate Readers (LPRs).

- The agency decentralized its Criminal Investigation Division, assigned two Auto Theft Unit detectives to each of its four districts and another to a regional auto theft task force managed by the Arizona Auto Theft Authority, and provided a citywide detective to support the district detectives and to coordinate the deployment of “bait cars” and the LPR. This reorganization promoted stronger bonds between detectives and patrol officers and allowed better quality information to be disseminated more quickly.
- Officers and volunteers were trained to utilize the LPR, so that its coverage could be expanded. The LPR was deployed 1,850 hours during 2007: 9 arrests were effected, 113 stolen vehicles—valued at almost \$1.2 million—were recovered, and 45 stolen registration plates were located.
- Agency members—in cooperation with those in allied departments—heavily promoted the Arizona Theft Authority’s “Watch Your Car” and H.E.A.T. programs and included free document-shreddings to prevent identity theft, as well as child-safety-seat installations and inspections. Almost 7,000 residents have been enrolled in “Watch Your Car”; 382 vehicles were VIN-etched, and their owners were provided free steering-wheel locks.
- Signs highlighting the “bait car” program were posted in an area vulnerable to thefts, and no vehicles were stolen in that area during the pilot month. This signing effort is being expanded to other areas of the city.

### **Multi-Agency Task Force Recognition (Tie):**

#### **Vehicle Investigations Project for Enforcement and Recovery (V.I.P.E.R.), Las Vegas, Nevada, Metropolitan Police Department, of which Douglas C. Gillespie is the Sheriff**

In 2005, Clark County, Nevada, ranked second in the United States in the number of vehicles stolen; only 10-to-15 percent of those recovered were occupied. V.I.P.E.R. was born as a County-wide solution to the problem. By 2007, all four major law enforcement agencies in Clark County had joined the task force: Henderson Police Department, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Nevada Highway Patrol, and North Las Vegas Police Department; and the Clark County School District Police, College of Southern Nevada Police,

National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles, and Nevada Transportation Administration (NTA) are represented on the task force.

Significant activities undertaken by the task force in 2007 included:

- Proposing legislation (1) to eliminate probation and suspended sentences for individuals who already have been convicted twice of grand larceny of a motor vehicle and (2) to require reporting of falsified vehicle identification numbers (VINs) and to authorize the forfeiture of vehicles with falsified VINs and without satisfactory evidence of ownership; and supporting legislation to create the Nevada Automobile Theft Authority
- Working, in conjunction with the NTA, to reduce illegal tows
- Deploying LPRs
- Substantially increasing the number and types of “bait cars,” making V.I.P.E.R.’s program one of the largest in the U.S. As a result of this effort, V.I.P.E.R. officers arrested in 2007, 155 individuals, 90 percent of whom were convicted of felonies.
- Investigating insurance frauds especially where vehicle owners burn their vehicles and then report them stolen. V.I.P.E.R. investigators effected in 2007 five “probable cause” arrests and requested 18 arrest warrants.
- Focusing on chop shops, 59 of which were investigated in 2007
- Initiating 24 “VIN-switch” cases where false VINs were placed on stolen vehicles, after which those vehicles were sold
- Aggressively targeting organized criminal groups. A single eight-month investigation into high-end vehicle thefts and violent carjackings, undertaken in conjunction with the U.S. Secret Service, yielded more than a dozen vehicles and twelve arrests.
- Investigating 39 automotive businesses that dealt in stolen vehicles or that used stolen parts, for which a very lucrative national black market exists
- Tracking R.A.T.S. [Repeat Auto Theft Suspects], Las Vegas’ 121 most prolific auto thieves who are vigorously prosecuted when arrested and 72 of whom currently are incarcerated
- Increased effective policing—in cooperation with Arizona and California authorities—of two major annual motorcycle rallies to recover stolen motorcycles and parts and to prevent thefts and fraudulent theft reports. A total of 39 motorcycles were reported stolen in 2004 and 2005 at the Laughlin River Run; a total of three were reported stolen in 2006 and 2007. Moreover, a total of 47 were reported stolen in 2004 and 2005 during the Las Vegas Bikefest; 16 were reported stolen in 2006, of which six were recovered at a California chop shop; and only one was reported stolen in 2007.
- Implementing the “Lock, Take & Hide” program in the vicinity of hotels

and resort areas whereby drivers are reminded to lock their vehicles, to take their keys with them, and to hide their valuables

- Increased partnering with the media both to educate the public of V.I.P.E.R.'s activities and to deter thieves

Overall, 3,099 less vehicles were stolen in Clark County in 2007 than in 2006, translating into a savings of \$12.7 million.

### **Stanislaus County, California, Auto Theft Task Force (StanCATT), of which Lieutenant Jeffrey M. Morris is the Commander**

Between 2003 and 2005, the NICB ranked the largest city of Stanislaus County, California—Modesto—as having the highest per capita rate of vehicle thefts in the U.S. However, through the educational, enforcement, and legislative efforts of the Stanislaus County Auto Theft Task Force (StanCATT), Modesto's ranking dropped to fifth in the nation.

StanCATT, established in 1996, is comprised of the following law enforcement agencies: California Highway Patrol, Ceres Police Department, Modesto Police Department, Stanislaus County District Attorney's Office, Stanislaus County Probation Department, and Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department. Stanislaus County lost its dubious honor via StanCATT's programs:

- Making public appearances; accepting speaking engagements at schools, businesses, civic clubs, and other organizations; participating in radio and television interviews; and contributing to the print media
- Creating a vehicle theft awareness flyer that was distributed with Modesto's water bills
- Developing a "bait car" program
- Proposing (1) that bail for first-offender vehicle thieves be increased from \$10,000.00 to \$40,000.00, and (2) that 120 days be the mandatory minimum sentence for all convicted auto thieves

As a result of three "bait car" operations in 2006, in which 65 persons were arrested, "bait cars" were incorporated into StanCATT's operations in 2007. StanCATT's officers worked with those of other agencies in high-visibility proactive enforcement operations in high-crime neighborhoods—known as Vehicle Theft Suppression Enforcement Teams—which resulted in reductions in vehicle theft and in other criminal activity. A total of more than 200 vehicle thieves were apprehended in 2007. Vehicle thefts in Stanislaus County declined by 3,664 in 2006-07, over 2004-05, a 27 percent reduction.

### **Individual Recognitions**

**State: Senior Trooper Timothy D. Cowles, Iowa State Patrol**

Trooper Cowles has devoted much of his 29-year career with the State Patrol to the investigation of vehicle theft. Most recently, he noticed that vehicle thefts had increased in the Omaha/Council Bluffs metropolitan area more than in any other area of Iowa, with 3,433 vehicles stolen in 2006 alone and with an additional 3,211 stolen in the first 11 months of 2007.

Trooper Cowles developed an undercover storefront strategy both to identify those involved in illicit activities and to disrupt their financial gains; it became known as "Operation Tow Truck," once it was accepted and approved by the Iowa Department of Public Safety. Trooper Cowles recruited other agencies to participate in this operation: ATF; Council Bluffs, Iowa, Police Department; DEA; FBI; Iowa Department of Public Safety's Intelligence Bureau; Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation; Iowa Division of Narcotics Enforcement; Nebraska State Patrol; NICB; Omaha, Nebraska, Police Department; Pottawattamie County, Iowa, Attorney's Office; U.S. Attorneys for the District of Nebraska and for the Southern District of Iowa; and Washington County, Nebraska, Sheriff's Office.

"Operation Tow Truck" began in October 2006, with the leasing and outfitting of a building in Council Bluffs which opened for business as "Chicago Imports" in February 2007. The first transaction involved stolen guns, and as many as five stolen cars a day were purchased before "Chicago Imports" closed its doors on November 1, 2007.

In nine months, 83 stolen vehicles (cars, backhoes, boats, jet skis, motorcycles, pickups, and travel trailers)—worth more than \$1.4 million—were purchased, along with cocaine and methamphetamine, and guns and other stolen property. The items purchased in 84 separate transactions had been stolen as early as March 2006, from Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Texas. Twenty-six defendants were identified and arrested in January 2008.

Trooper Cowles "lived" "Operation Tow Truck." His extraordinary dedication to duty is exemplified by his carrying and answering three cell phones, 24 hours a day, during the life of this effort and by his being away from his home and family many days at a time and is evidenced by the success of "Operation Tow Truck" and the high level of cooperation which existed between the myriad agencies involved in this multi-jurisdictional effort.

**Municipal: Police Agent Martin Bolger, Chula Vista, California, Police Department**

Detective Bolger led the administrative side of "Southside Blitz," an undercover operation initiated in January 2007 by the Regional Auto Theft Task Force to infiltrate and collapse vehicle theft rings in San Diego County. He was responsible for staffing, funding, preparing arrest and search warrants, ensuring

communications, and coordinating all efforts with ATF, California Department of Insurance, NICB, and San Diego County District Attorney's Office. He demonstrated persistence, commitment, leadership, and strong investigative skills to ensure the success of this effort, which has been described as "the largest and most complex operation of its kind."

Detective Bolger opened a storefront and—with the assistance of undercover law enforcement officers and informants—was able to purchase in 11 months 160 stolen vehicles worth more than \$1.9 million, as well as illegal firearms and narcotics. This operation identified 91 suspects, many of whom were gang members and parolees with extensive criminal histories, and resulted in the issuance of 73 vehicle-theft-related arrest warrants. Two of the defendants currently are being investigated for two distinct homicides, while a third one operated a large narcotic and illegal immigrant smuggling ring. Those convicted thus far have been sentenced to imprisonment between three years and life.