

Sex-trafficking app to tip off police

A free cellphone app debuting Friday aims to teach citizens how to identify signs of sex trafficking and send in tips to police — and provide law enforcement with data that can help officers rescue victims and build criminal cases against pimps and men who pay for sex.

By [Sara Jean Green](#)

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LINDSEY WASSON / The Seattle Times

King County sheriff's detectives Joel Banks, left, and Brian Taylor received a Dignity Award in Beverly Hills, Calif., earlier this month for their work aiding sex-trafficked women and girls.

Sex-trafficking app

Redlight Traffic app is to be available for download beginning Friday.

Police officers who would like to access the Redlight Traffic database can send an email to verify@redlighttraffic.org.

After King County sheriff's detectives Brian Taylor and Joel Banks gave a 20-minute presentation on sex trafficking to a group of 30 people at a Downtown Seattle Kiwanis Club luncheon in December 2011, the two men walked out of the meeting at the Columbia Tower not expecting anything to come of it.

But in the audience that day was Amin Haq, the club's current president and an independent oil and energy broker who, at the time, was enrolled in a leadership-enrichment program through the nonprofit Leadership Eastside in Redmond.

“I was floored. I couldn’t believe it was happening in my own backyard,” Haq recalled of learning that underage girls were being prostituted in the same hotels he could see from the windows of Seattle’s tallest building.

Through a key component of the leadership program, Haq and four teammates were tasked with coming up with a sustainable project with regional impact. They decided to focus on helping communities combat sex- and human-trafficking and reached out to the Seattle Kiwanis Memorial Fund, the club’s giving arm, which took on their project as a club program and provided a \$26,000 startup grant.

On Friday, that program — called Redlight Traffic — is launching a first-of-its-kind app for iPhones and Androids that will funnel citizens’ anonymous tips on suspected prostitution activities to law enforcement through a secure website that can only be accessed by police officers.

The idea behind the app is to help fill two glaring gaps: Teach citizens how to identify signs of sex-trafficking and give them an easy way to do something about it; and provide law enforcement with data that can potentially help officers rescue victims and build criminal cases against pimps and men who pay for sex.

“There are a lot of scenarios that don’t amount to a 911 call,” said Banks, a member of the sheriff’s Street Crimes Unit, which investigates prostitution-related cases. “I thought (the app) was a pretty clever way to see that gap and fill it in.”

A patrol officer isn’t going to respond to a report of, say, a man in his 30s berating a teenager on the side of the road, or to a tip that an “obviously older man in a stereotypical ‘pimp car’ ” is riding around with a much younger girl, because those situations aren’t crimes, Banks said.

Through the app, though, citizens will be able to report their suspicions, upload photos and GPS locations, and provide information on a business, vehicle or person — whether that person is a suspected prostitute, pimp or buyer. Officers will be able to search and review individual reports and view a map of all reported incidents in an area.

“We get so many leads that are sketchy and limited — but if we can compare it to what’s in the database, we might be able to build a case,” Banks said.

“Sometimes we only get a partial plate,” he said, but if a citizen is able to report a vehicle description and a full license-plate number, that kind of cross-referencing can lead officers to a name.

“Now you’ve ID’d your pimp and you know where he lives,” Banks said. “I’m pretty stoked.”

Although the free app will launch nationally Friday, it is expected to take some time before it catches on in cities outside the Seattle metropolitan area, said Jessica Smith, a past president of the Downtown Seattle Kiwanis Club and among those working on the Redlight Traffic program.

To help spread the word, Redlight Traffic is partnering with a nonprofit network of 2,700 police chaplains across the country, she said.

“It’s like Neighborhood Watch with technology,” Smith said of the app.

A couple of weeks ago, Redlight Traffic hosted its first Dignity Gala at the Beverly Hills Hilton in Los Angeles. Taylor and Banks — as well as Bazzel Baz, a former government-intelligence officer who founded the Association for the Recovery of Children, based in Redondo Beach, Calif. — received the program’s “Dignity Award” for their work helping vulnerable and exploited kids.

Taylor and Banks were previously involved in creating The Genesis Project, a center in SeaTac aimed at helping girls and women leave prostitution and rebuild their lives. Both resigned from the Genesis board earlier this year over concerns about [financial mismanagement](#) and are no longer associated with it. An investigation later determined no crime had been committed.

Pop singer Demi Lovato performed her song, “Warrior,” live for the first time at the Dignity Gala, which was attended by cast members of the TV show “The Vampire Diaries,” other young stars, and others in the entertainment industry.

“It was a very humbling experience being at that event. There were a lot of celebrities and a red carpet and paparazzi,” Taylor said. “I was totally out of my element.”

Banks — who with Taylor has testified in court as an expert witness on sex-trafficking and taught countless seminars for police agencies and community groups on the topic — said he is amazed by the whole chain of events.

“A 20-minute presentation at a luncheon, that was it. I never thought anybody would run with anything,” he said. “Then we get a call — we’re launching an app, organizing a gala and we want to give you an award.

“It was totally surreal ... but an honor, for sure.”

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