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MERCED COUNTY BECOMES LATEST COMMUNITY TO CREATE CRIME STOPPERS PROGRAM

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Crime Stoppers is a nationally recognized program that encourages citizens to provide confidential information leading to the arrest of criminals. On Wednesday, during a press conference on the steps of the historic County Courthouse, local community and law enforcement leaders announced the creation of Merced County's first Crime Stoppers program.

Merced Area Crime Stoppers is based on the principle that "Someone other than the criminal has information that can solve a crime." Crime Stoppers pays rewards to people who provide information leading to the arrest of criminals. The keys to the success of the program, which began in the late 1970s, are twofold, according to Patrick Lunney, Chief Investigator for the Merced County District Attorney's office. The fear of retaliation or reprisal by the criminal is eliminated because the reporting person is completely anonymous throughout the entire process, Lunney said. Even those persons who have an attitude of apathy are often persuaded to report criminals because they will receive a monetary reward for that information if it leads to an arrest, he added.

Lunney, who has spearheaded the organization of the new Crime Stoppers, said no one in law enforcement ever knows the identity of the person providing the information, and the person is never contacted to be a witness or provide testimony. Information can be provided by phone call, email or text to a neutral point of contact. The caller is provided with a secret code number and if the information leads to an arrest, the person holding the secret code number will be eligible for a monetary reward, to be given at a neutral site, he said.

Fresno and Stanislaus Counties have had successful Crime Stoppers programs for many years. In fact, Lunney said, the idea for Merced Area Crime Stoppers came after Merced County District Attorney Larry D. Morse II attended a Crime Stoppers fundraiser in 2009 for Stanislaus County and decided Merced should have its own. The program is a community based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, which means the board of directors is comprised entirely of volunteer citizens from across Merced County. The board of directors oversees the entire operation of the program. All Police Chiefs in Merced County and the District Attorney are members of the advisory committee, but take no active role in managing the program.

Reward money is generated through fundraising activities and solicitations from individuals, companies and organizations.

Crime Stoppers was the brainchild of a young, Albuquerque, New Mexico detective frustrated over an unsolved homicide of a university student. That detective staged a reenactment of the crime which ran on local television stations and resulted in the arrest of the perpetrator.

Gathering together local citizens, law enforcement and the media, the very first Crime Stoppers program was then launched in 1976 in Albuquerque. Today, community and student Crime Stoppers programs reach throughout the United States and around the world.

Lunney said history has shown the three essential components of a successful Crime Stoppers program “are community involvement, media participation and law enforcement cooperation. Fortunately, we’ve had all three in abundance in our efforts to create Merced Area Crime Stoppers. This is a true collaborative effort between many persons and organizations.”

Los Banos businessman, and former police chief, Mike Hughes, is the chairman of the board. Other board members are: Dos Palos city manager Darrell Fonseca, UC Merced professor and Merced resident Dr. Richard Miller, Gustine mayor Dennis Brazil, Los Banos resident Elias Reyes, Livingston resident Kaye Greeley, Merced resident Susie Bubenchik, Merced resident Joseph Carrillo, Atwater realtor and resident Andy Krotik, Merced resident David Baker, Merced businessman and resident Mike Altomor, and Merced businessman and resident Ray Beverly.

The board of directors plan to take the program live on October 3, 2011. All reporting numbers and reporting procedures will be generally publicized by the press and media prior to that date.