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Sniper probe to get help from Tucson

By L. Anne Newell

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A program developed by Tucson police and the University of Arizona will be used to try to capture the Washington, D.C.,-area sniper, officials said Tuesday, just hours after the sniper apparently claimed another life.

At the request of federal and Washington, D.C.,-area law enforcement officials, two Tucson police officers and four COPLINK program technicians will fly to Washington today to begin implementing the program - which links data from various systems and allows officers to search for suspects with partial information.

Lt. Jennifer Schroeder and Detective Tim Petersen also will start training officers from the Montgomery County, Md., Police Department, the lead agency in the probe, on how to use the program, which has spread to several states since it was conceived in 1996 and put into use in Tucson three years later.

Their ultimate goal will be connecting as many agencies around Washington as possible, allowing them to solve crimes more quickly, as officials say has occurred in Tucson already.

"It's really exciting," Schroeder said. "If we are able to assist in any way, we'll be thrilled."

The sniper had killed nine people and injured three others through early Tuesday, when a bus driver was fatally shot. Officials were working to find out if the shot was fired by the sniper.

Schroeder and Petersen expected to have part of COPLINK running in Washington in a week. But they'd be happy if officials catch the sniper earlier.

"I'll be thrilled to death if they can catch this guy before I even leave," Petersen said.

COPLINK works by combining databases, limiting the number of individual searches officers have to perform. They can enter partial vehicle and suspect descriptions and the program will locate everyone who fits

the description.

It does have some drawbacks, though, officials said. Officers enter pre-existing databases, most based on criminal activity. That means those with no previous criminal records or contacts with police won't come up.

The program - developed at the UA Artificial Intelligence Lab and funded through grants from the National Institute of Justice and the National Science Foundation - is also being used in Texas, Michigan, Massachusetts, Iowa and Washington state. A separate company - Knowledge Computing Corp. - was spun off to market it.

The success has been great, said a UA professor of management information systems who helped design COPLINK.

But the move to Washington, D.C., is even more gratifying to Hsinchun Chen, founder of Knowledge Computing and head of the UA's Artificial Intelligence Lab. For years, he has told municipal law enforcement agencies there that their systems needed to be connected.

"They've known the problem has been there for some time," Chen said. "It just takes this kind of national high-profile incident and tragedy to bring this issue to the front page."

The request for the program came after the U.S. Justice Department offered Montgomery County officials a number of resources that might help them, including COPLINK.

Schroeder and Petersen said they couldn't say exactly what COPLINK will do for the investigation because they weren't familiar with all the details of the shootings. They expect to work with criminal and motor vehicle records and, in general, said COPLINK should trim the number of leads in the case.

"We'll have an awful lot of information to sift through, but that's what this program does well," Petersen said.

Schroeder said COPLINK already has assisted Tucson police in solving many

crimes and is used by some officers - such as gang and robbery investigators - on a daily basis.

One case involved a suspect with the nickname "Shorty," Schroeder said. All police knew was that a person had been shot, stabbed and run over by a car driven by "Shorty." They found a suspect with COPLINK.

"It happened in the morning and by evening we had an arrest," Schroeder said. "Information we now get in 15 minutes used to take a week or two."

In another incident, officers solved a convenience store robbery when the clerk told them the robber lived in the area and was called "Chaco." And a homicide suspect who gave police a fake ID was busted via COPLINK too, she said.

That's a payoff other law enforcement agencies, including the Phoenix Police Department, hope to duplicate.

COPLINK is still in the implementation stage there, but officials think it could be operational within several months, said Sgt. Randy Force, a Phoenix Police Department spokesman.

"COPLINK is going to be a great program," he said. "We certainly have great expectations for it."

He said it will be especially helpful to his department for the same reason it should help authorities in the Washington, D.C., area: It helps alleviate many burdens of multi-jurisdictional cases. There are about 20 law enforcement agencies in the greater Phoenix area, he said.

"It's no small obstacle to overcome when you involve people from multiple agencies," he said. "I'm sure the law enforcement agencies in Maryland and Virginia are finding what a big obstacle that is. But it's something they're going to have to overcome if they're going to solve this case."

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