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ROBBERIES

Robberies on increase; police worry

By VICKI ADAME / Vida en el Valle

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STOCKTON — The Stockton Police Department faced a dilemma as it saw increasingly large numbers of Spanish-speaking persons become the victims of robbery in the past few years.

Although the numbers were significant, Lt. Trevor Womack believed the number of robberies were being under-reported.

"We wanted to take a new approach and educate the Spanish-speaking community and provide help," Womack said.

The police department tried to do its own outreach efforts in the past but with only limited success. The department lacked the buy-in of local agencies and businesses, said Lt. Jim Ballard.

"It didn't work, or at least not to the level we wanted it to work," Ballard said.

Womack sought the help of the San Joaquin County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Mark Martinez, the chamber's chief executive director, soon realized that Latinos who were robbed lost money that would be spent locally on things like rent, entertainment and food.

"We needed to do something to minimize some of that," Martinez said.

As a result, L.E.A.L.E.S. — Latinos Educated About Law Enforcement Services — was born.

In 2005, there were 75 street robberies of Latino males in the police department's Park District and 120 in the Seaport District, according to police records. The two areas are almost entirely south of the Crosstown Freeway and east of Wilson Way.

The Seaport District saw a spike in robberies during July while the Park District saw a spike during November. And Saturday afternoons and nights also saw the most number of robberies. Womack said he didn't know why this occurred, but suspected that's when more people are out shopping and enjoying themselves.

The biggest problem, said police officials, in getting Spanish-speaking victims to report a crime was a lack of trust in law enforcement. So L.E.A.L.E.S. worked with community sponsors, agencies and businesses that Latinos frequent and have come to trust.

"When we're able to have major Spanish-speaking companies involved, we're able to reach a greater group of people in a shorter period of time," Martinez said.

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The group decided to focus on educating people on how not to become a victim.

"I can't think of a better, more perfect victim — someone who is Spanish-speaking, carries a lot of cash and is afraid to go to the police. I don't want that," Womack said.

The police department, with the help of L.E.A.L.E.S. members, made flyers that contain tips on what to do if a person is the victim of a robbery.

In addition to the flyers, the department's Spanish-speaking officers go out and talk to people.

"We've had officers go into businesses such as laundromats, and talk face to face with people and give them the information," Womack said.

Officers also walk the neighborhoods and talk to people to try to build trust, Ballard said.

The policy of the Stockton Police Department is for officers not to inquire about the immigration status of crime victims. In Stockton, victims should report crimes to the police regardless of their immigration status.

The police department needs your help to arrest these criminals. If you are a victim, use the following guidelines:

1. Try to remain calm and do as they ask.
2. Never assume that the criminal is unarmed.
3. Observe the suspect so you can give an accurate description:

a) Race b) Age c) Height and Weight d) Color, style and length of hair e) Eye color. Do they wear glasses? f) Facial characteristics (scars, mustache, beard, tattoos) g) Description of clothing (pants, shirt, hat, jacket, shoes) h) Description of vehicle (make, model, year, color, type of rims or tires, window tint) i) Description of weapon (knife, gun, rifle)

To report a robbery call 9-1-1 for emergencies or 937-8377 for non-emergencies.

Send e-mail to: vadame@vidaenelvalle.com

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