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Police expand use of high-tech shot detection system

By Daniel Taylor

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The District's high-tech gunshot-detection system has crossed the Anacostia River into the 5th District in Northeast.

Shotspotter, the audio-monitoring tool used by law-enforcement agencies to pinpoint gunfire, previously was confined to the Metropolitan Police Department's 7th District in Southeast. But new devices recently have been installed in the 5th and 6th police districts, and the system eventually could cover the city.

"The more we expand, the more accurate it gets," acting Chief Cathy L. Lanier told The Washington Times. "Hopefully, we'll have one of the largest gunshot-detection systems in the U.S."

The devices, which are about the size of a coffee can, have been in place in Southeast since August. They use a triangulation system to coordinate with other nearby Shotspotter devices to determine precisely where gunshots are fired.

Then information then is immediately relayed to police.

"The dispatch center will know within about 10 seconds," said Gregg Rowland, senior vice president of Santa Clara, Calif.-based Shotspotter Inc. "We literally put a dot on the map and give them the exact address and time."

Mr. Rowland won't say where authorities place the devices, but you won't find them on telephone poles or street lights where they can easily be seen.

They have a range of about 2 miles and are guaranteed accurate to within about 75 feet, though typically they are closer to the exact location, he said.

The devices also are sophisticated enough to distinguish gunshots from similar sounds such as a car backfiring or firecrackers going off.

Chief Lanier said during a D.C. Council hearing earlier this month that the system had identified 31 shootings and led to three arrests since its installation.

"It's proven to me that it's useful," she said.

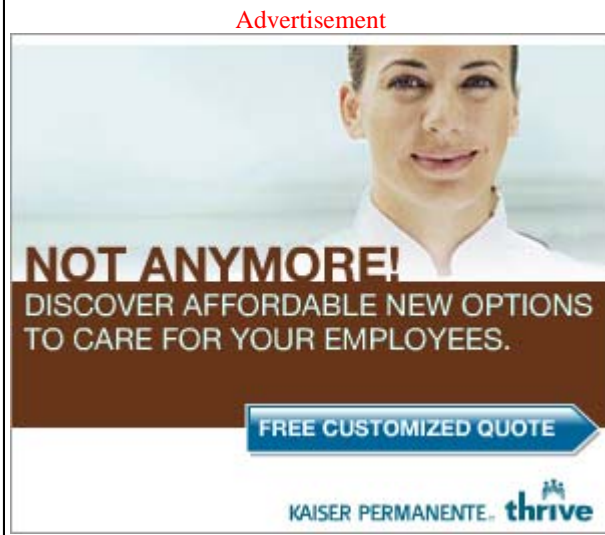
The FBI's Washington Field Office is paying for the system, which is expensive. Shotspotter charges about \$200,000 to place enough devices to cover a square mile.

The FBI operates the system jointly with city police. Ron Chavarro, a supervisory special agent who runs the program, said the Washington Field Office has gotten involved because local crime is a priority for the agency.

"That's one of the FBI's primary missions," Mr. Chavarro said. "Each field office does have a responsibility for the territory they cover to combat serious, violent crime."

Mr. Chavarro said he brought the system to the D.C. area after using it to help solve a

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series of random highway shootings by a sniper near Columbus, Ohio, in late 2003 and early 2004. One person was killed and the entire region was in a panic until a man was arrested with the help of the system.

"Literally within a 24-hour to 48-hour period when it was first installed, we knew what kind of gun he was shooting, where he was shooting from," he said. "And when the first shot was fired, we dispatched the lead detective. That led us directly to identifying the individual and locking him up."

Shotspotter alerted police to a double homicide in Southeast in September. A 32-year-old man and 14-year-old boy were fatally shot in the hallway of a building at 3414 13th Place.

The system also helped police make an arrest in October, when a man was fatally shot while doing landscaping work near the new Unified Communications Center in Southeast. Shotspotter detected the gunshots and pinpointed their location, allowing officers to be dispatched to the scene immediately and make an arrest.

The FBI is looking to expand the system into the 3rd District, but there is no timetable. Mr. Chavarro said implementing the system is an "arduous process" that includes deciding where to put the devices and getting finances at different government levels.

Authorities would like to have the entire District covered by the system.

"That is the goal, eventually," Mr. Chavarro said.

Shotspotter officials have been in discussions with other jurisdictions in the area. Alexandria officials are interested in the technology and are working toward getting funding, according to the company.

Officials in Prince George's County have talked with Shotspotter representatives as recently as three months ago, but nothing has been set in motion to bring the technology to the county, a company official said.

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