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How key are tipsters to solving crime?

Experts: Lure of reward isn't enough

Even large payouts don't necessarily loosen lips

By Jessica Lipscomb

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One tipster soon will be \$25,000 richer after last week's capture of fugitive Wesnel Isaac, a man accused in a 2007 Bonita Springs triple homicide who had fled to Haiti.

Another tipster or group of tipsters could be in for a similar payday after the Collier/Naples

Home Invasion Task Force makes a decision about a \$26,000 reward patched together by a number of anonymous donors. The task force is determining if anyone is eligible for the reward following the arrests of four men in Orange County with "links" to five home invasions this year in Collier.

"The investigation remains active, and task force members are working with Crime Stop-

pers on a plan to ensure an equitable distribution of the reward dollars to the person/persons who are entitled to the money," said Karie Partington, a Collier County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman.

The practice of offering reward money for tips is nothing new — Crime Stoppers International has been doing it since 1976. And yet, in the nearly four decades since, program coordinators across the country still have to rely

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on anecdotal evidence on whether the lure of a payday actually helps solve crimes. No academic research on the effectiveness of the practice is readily available.

All rewards from Southwest Florida Crime Stoppers are paid in cash, with a maximum of \$1,000. Last year, the local organization handed out nearly \$145,000, an average of about \$12,000 per month.

Program coordinator Trish Routte said nearly everyone who calls in a tip eventually cashes in on his or her reward, which could indicate that money is a motivator. But a large dollar amount doesn't necessarily lead to more tips, she said.

Routte pointed to the homicide of a Bonita Springs woman, Denise Long, 36, whose body was found in 2000. After about five years with no arrest in the case, Long's family put up a \$100,000 reward.

"That didn't jolt anybody to come forward," Routte said. "That case is still unsolved."

In the home invasion cases, a portion of the total \$26,000 reward — the \$1,000 maximum funded by Crime Stoppers — was handed out Wednesday. Routte said a person called in a tip Saturday that led deputies to the Immokalee house where one of the Orange County suspects, Henry "Big Rick" Contreras, was hiding.

Routte said the full reward likely won't be disbursed until arrests are made in Collier County. The donors have agreed the money shouldn't be tied to a conviction or plea, just on the basis of an arrest.

Other Crime Stoppers programs across the country have had varied success in cases with large rewards. When Maryland State Trooper Wesley Brown was shot and killed outside an Applebee's while working security in 2010, multiple organizations pitched in to create a \$75,000 reward for information.

That information led to the arrest of the shooter, who was sentenced to life in prison. Last year, the reward money finally was disseminated among multiple tipsters.

Zel Windsor, the coordinator for Prince George's County Crime Solvers, said the large dollar figure might have helped solve the case, but it wasn't the only reason people called in information.

"Basically, the trooper was ambushed, and the community was a little upset behind that," she said.

Windsor said high rewards in other cases have yet to bring a resolution.

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"We have one from November of last year where a U.S. postal employee was shot and killed. The police department put up \$25,000 and the postal inspector put up \$25,000, and it is still open," she said. The reward since has increased to \$100,000.

Becky Fallon, program coordinator of the Greensboro/Gilford Crime Stoppers in South Carolina, said certain types of crimes — those against animals or children, for instance — tend to draw in more tips than others. She said some callers also seem to be more motivated by rewards than others.

"You may get the typical crackhead or whatever looking for his next buy and he'd sell out anybody in a heartbeat," she said.

Like Route and Windsor, Fallon said she has not noticed a consistent pattern of large reward amounts leading to information in those cases. A grocery store robbery with a \$75,000 reward has not led to an arrest, she said, but the announcement of a \$10,000 reward in another case almost immediately brought in tips.

"I think for some callers it is just the money. But for the people who are really just trying to do the right thing, the money is not the motivator at all," she said. "It's a mixed bag."

In her area, Fallon said about 30 percent of callers never claim their reward. But she said there's no real way for local Crime Stoppers coordinators to know why tipsters are calling.

"I don't know if there's a way to determine if (money's) the motivation. It's not something we would ask them," Fallon said.

Large rewards also tend to lead to an increase in media coverage, which can help bring attention to a case. In January 2013, actor Tyler Perry traveled to the Naples area to announce a total of \$100,000 in rewards to help solve the cases of missing Collier men Felipe Santos and Terrence Williams.

Perry, who brought along the Rev. Al Sharpton, offered \$25,000 for information leading to the whereabouts of each of the men and \$25,000 for information leading to the conviction or plea agreement of a suspect or suspects in the cases. The rewards brought national media attention, but the cases remain unsolved.

"Despite when Tyler Perry came down here and did that big to-do about it, really nothing came in after that," Route said.

The donors who pitched in reward money for the home invasion cases did so because it was one of the only ways they could make a difference, she said.

"They're not law enforcement, so they can't go out and investigate, but I think this is the community's way of saying, 'This is the way we can help this,'" Route said. "And I applaud that."

Investigators still are asking for tips from anyone with information about the Collier County robberies. Tips to Crime Stoppers can be made locally by calling 1-800-780-TIPS (8477), visiting www.swflcrimestoppers.org or texting CRIMES (274637) with the keyword "REWARD."

"(Rewards) do work — not always — but we're at this point where everyone's desperate to try anything so that we can bring this case to conclusion," Route said.