New technology could
report threats in seconds

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Authors: hjones@thelancasternews.com

Byline: By Haley Jones
hjones@thelancasternews.com

Content

Lancaster County school board members learned about an innovative smartphone application, called SaferWatch, that can instantly report dangerous threats to law enforcement.

The software aims to reduce the report time for threats and make the channels of communication more efficient for law enforcement to respond to scenes, like schools.

Michael Sparks, SaferWatch senior vice president of sales and channel development, Michael Sparks, showed board members a live demonstration of a threat from the reporting phase to the conclusion. Sparks has been in the technology and software solution sales sector for over 30 years, with an emphasis on solutions for government and first responders.

"(This is) something that we would like to move forward with as a district, and increase our partnership with the sheriff's department and also the city police, as we try to work together to keep our kids safe," said Superintendent Dr. Jonathan Phipps.

According to SaferWatch's website, the real-time intelligence allows school resource officers (SROs) to get to the scene faster and be more prepared, as the app can provide coordinates, case details, parties involved and even send real-time videos or pictures.

SaferWatch also has a one-time click emergency activation system, and aims to condense the channels of communication in an effort to mitigate crises.

"What it does is it gives you the ability from your phone to initiate an alert, an alert that goes straight to 911 with support to the police department, the sheriff," Sparks said. "The buttons that you put on the phone are completely definable, you'll decide what they are."

The phone application is internet or WiFi reliant, and Phipps confirmed each school in the district is equipped with the proper equipment for internet or 5G service.

Sparks said once you open the application and choose a "threat" category that is personalized by the user, the person reporting has the option to take a picture, send a voice message or a text directly to law enforcement.

"For instance, if I see an intruder, I need to communicate and provide information intelligence that will help mitigate the potential casualties," Sparks said.

The app also allows user to submit anonymous tips or medical emergencies. As information is sent in, the submitted forum continuously updates to provide minute-by-minute occurrences. It also allows for two-way communication, such as law enforcement sending out public safety alerts.

Sparks said the estimated cost, if the board approved it, would be about $60,000. The software has a $1,000 set-up fee per school and requires an annual renewal fee of $2,500 per school.

"To my knowledge, Lancaster doesn't have anything like this in place today, so they're vulnerable," Sparks said. " I think it's a smart thing to do."

Q&A at meeting

Sparks also answered questions from community and board members surrounding data privacy, potential misuse, specific location pinpoints, access and monitoring.

The most-asked question, Sparks said, is how to navigate misuse of the technology, either through false alarms or unauthorized users. He said that it will depend on the district to put policies in place to monitor usage of the SaferWatch. He also said that any technology can be misused, but the lives possibly saved have to outweigh the risk factor.

He said there is also an option that reports threats only to staff, instead of law enforcement. This would allow matters like discipline or non-violent threats to be handled by school personnel, rather than law enforcement.

"It has to be customized to the entire district," Sparks said, adding that it can't be customized for each school.

Sparks said the district will also decide how reported threats will be managed, during and after, through the "command console."

"You will get an acknowledgement that you submitted the tip, and that it's been passed on, but as far as additional information afterwards, that's gonna depend on the district policy," Sparks said.

The additional information notes section available when making a report will allow users to put in specific buildings, room numbers or school areas, which are more accurate than coordinates set by the app's geo-fencing.

"There's a lot of other ways that an application like SaferWatch can promote positive mental health — it gives people an opportunity to get engaged with youngsters before they do self harm, before they drop out of school," Sparks said. "It doesn't have to be something as dramatic or as tragic as a school shooting."

SaferWatch is being used in over 2,000 schools today, in over 5,000 locations and six out of the 10 largest school districts in the country. It is based in Florida and monitored in over 200 911 centers.
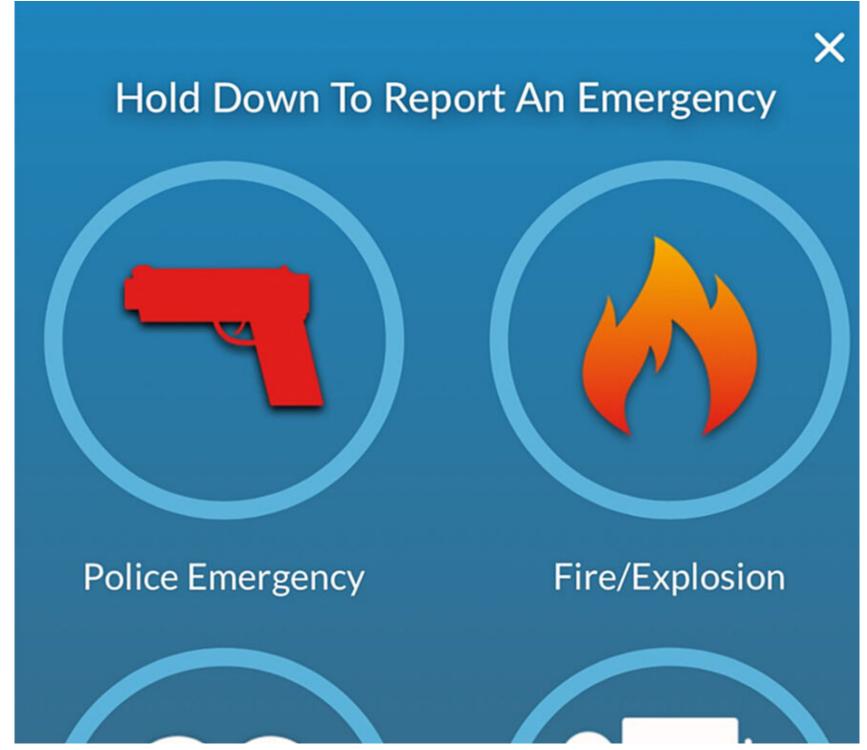
"One thing that Lancaster's really doing right, is, you can see there's a collaborative effort between the school board, the superintendent team and law enforcement," Sparks said. "They are all working together, and you don't see that in every community around the country. It's a blessing to see that; it's something that Lancaster should be proud of."
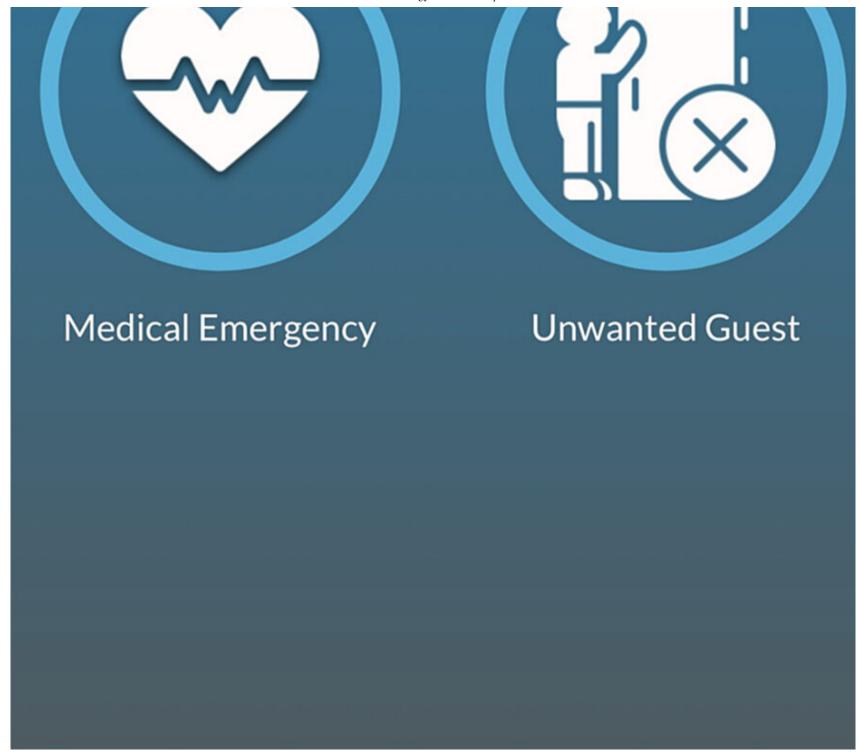
Sheriff Barry Faile and Police Chief Don Roper were present and both said they encourage the board to pass this technology to save lives.

Phipps said he hopes the board can vote to finalize using SaferWatch at the Oct. 17 board meeting.

Child images

LANNWS-10-14-23 SAFERWATCH 1

Medical Emergency   Unwanted Guest

LANNWS-10-14-23 SAFERWATCH 2