

## **Internet Crimes Task Force Finding Success**

Ghosts haunt crooks on line

Internet crimes task force finding success

By LaDonna Beeker

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OCONEE COUNTY — Westminster Police Sgt. Gordon Hopkins starts his computer, turns on the recording program and signs in to a Yahoo music chat room. Today, he is a 12-year-old female.

Minutes later a 26-year-old male supposedly living in Miami, Fla., begins a chat.

“ASL?” asks the adult male, after his initial “hey” and “what’s up?” It’s a chat acronym to ask another person’s age, sex and location.

“I tell them the minor age, and sometimes they leave at that point or they hang around and chat,” Hopkins said.

If the chatter continues with the “minor,” there’s a chance a crime is about to be committed.

Hopkins is one of many trained investigators in South Carolina who is a part of an Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force run out of the S.C. Attorney General office.

Among the 55 affiliated agencies across the state are the Westminster Police Department, Oconee County Sheriff’s Office, Pickens County Sheriff’s Office and Central and Clemson police departments.

“The mission and goal of the task forces from day one has been to protect children from crimes that are facilitated through technology against them,” said Deborah Shupe, commander for the S.C. Attorney General ICAC.

### **ICAC History**

South Carolina was one of 10 task forces started in 1998 by the Department of Justice.

“Originally in the task forces, the focus was on education and trying to educate the public,” Shupe said. “In around 2002 or so, the focus from Washington (D.C.) shifted to investigation and prosecution. We now actively investigate and prosecute cases.”

In 2004, the criminal solicitation of a minor law was enacted, Shupe said, which opened more doors for prosecution as suspects could be arrested before ever touching a child.

The task force made its first arrest in January 2005.

In 2008, the U.S. Congress passed the Protect our Children Act, which Shupe said codified ICAC. With the new law, there must be an ICAC task force in every state, funded on an annual basis.

The Attorney General's office continues to receive federal funds that pay for most ICAC activities. The amount South Carolina receives varies annually based on a formula that includes the number of cyber tips and population in a jurisdiction.

"Of the 61 task forces (in the nation), we are somewhere in the middle of the funding," Shupe said. "For a state our size, we are doing a good job. We are getting cyber tips and making the arrests."

### **Becoming an investigator**

Internet investigators are typically recommended by their agency or by request. For Hopkins and Investigator Justin Ward, of the Oconee County Sheriff's Office, becoming an ICAC officer came with personal interest and a desire to stop Internet predators.

"We are looking for predators," Hopkins said. "We are in the business of protecting children."

Before an officer can become certified to go undercover online, several classes and first-hand training with another ICAC investigator are required.

"We have to have basic computer skills, preparation to get online, set up websites to visit, create an underage persona, learn lingo of the age portrayed and learn the computer software, which is a tool to capture screen shots and discussions," Hopkins said.

Hopkins took a pre-test to be accepted into the course through the Attorney General's office. Once trained and set up for work, everything has to be documented and recorded.

"Legal issues (are) involved, so documentation is key," Hopkins said. "Your proof is your evidence."

When an officer signs on, it records the Internet provider address, places a time stamp all on software to display who the investigator is and records every chat the officer has with screen shots as the chat takes place.

Investigators can track the user's IP address and also request a screenshot of the suspect's screen and send that to a judge when requesting a warrant.

Three prosecutors in the Attorney General's office handle only ICAC cases. They are available to investigators daily to filter legal questions or resolve problems officers might have with a case. ICAC members also work with agencies in other counties and states, depending on the location of the suspect.

The amount of time and the time of day an investigator chats undercover varies depending on manpower and online activity.

Predators, Hopkins said, are online day and night and sometimes even access chat rooms while at work.

## **A success**

South Carolina has more predators behind bars or banned from accessing the Internet than it did about 10 years ago.

“There are around 300 people that would be online soliciting children or trading child pornography in South Carolina and might have actually reached out and harmed a child, who are not in a position to do that now and are prosecuted,” Shupe said.

Offenders can also be required to register as a sex offenders.

With more grant money, the Attorney General’s office was able to create an in-house lab to process computer hard drives seized from suspects.

“We always want to expand,” Shupe said. “We are outnumbered. There is no way we can get all the bad guys. We certainly can’t arrest our way out of the problem.”

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ICAC cases prosecuted in South Carolina

Statewide – 300

Oconee – 21

Pickens – 2

ICAC convictions

Statewide – 190

OPickens – 2 convicted

Source: S.C. Attorney General’s Office

conee – 18 convicted/3 pending