

CPSO partners with OffenderWatch to protect children from sexual predators

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Posted by Cindy Chadwick - (318) 681-0666

The Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office has partnered with OffenderWatch, the nation's leading sex offender registry notification network, to offer a new mobile app to keep families and children safer.

The OffenderWatch Safe Virtual Neighborhood (SVN) app is free for download on both Android and iPhone smartphone devices. After downloading the app, citizens will be able to see registered sex offenders located near them or their family members. They will also receive free alerts when a registered sex offender moves into their neighborhood. The app also offers online safety information and tips on how to talk to children about sex offenders.

With nearly 800 registered sex offenders in Caddo Parish, the Sheriff's Office has provided OffenderWatch notification information since 2006 through its website at www.caddosheriff.org. But the app will provide Caddo Parish residents with even more services from their mobile phones or other devices.

"Over 80 percent of Americans live within one mile of a registered sex offender, and online harassment and abuse continues to increase," said Sheriff Steve Prator. "Our children are vulnerable, and it's time that all parents pay attention."

One in five teens has received an unwanted sexual solicitation online, according to the Crimes Against Children Research Center. In 2018, most of the more than 18 million tips reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children dealt with child sexual abuse images, online enticement, including "sextortion," child sex trafficking, and child sexual molestation.

Online safety has been a challenge for both law enforcement and technology companies for years, but now Safe Virtual Neighborhood is helping bridge the gap. Later this fall, families will have the option to choose to upgrade the app to a paid version, which includes more features. In the "Protect Plus" version of Safe Virtual Neighborhood, the app will monitor a child's Snapchat activity, texts, emails, location and phone calls. The app then sends an immediate alert to parents if a registered sex offender contacts the child, or if the child lingers near the address of a sex offender.

"Our mission is to help law enforcement better protect communities from sexual predators, so we are constantly innovating to offer new solutions for both our virtual and physical worlds," said Mike Cormaci, president and co-founder of Covington-based OffenderWatch. "As predators continue to groom and solicit children online, we're helping law enforcement and families combat these efforts before it becomes a tragedy. If Safe Virtual Neighborhood helps to save one child from abuse, it's worth it."

How OffenderWatch Safe Virtual Neighborhood Works:

- Parents who sign up for Safe Virtual Neighborhood download the app on their own smartphone and their child's Android or iPhone device.
- In the free version of the app, parents can see their child's location and the location of registered sex offenders.
- Parents will receive notifications if a sex offender moves into their neighborhood.

You can download the SVN app by visiting the App Library on your mobile phone or connecting at www.caddosheriff.org under the Resources tab.