



Angels of the Internet

Law enforcement agencies frustrated by Internet crime scenes seemingly as large as the heavens, take note: An angel is on the way. A "Cyberangel," that is. Cyberangels, an all-volunteer nonprofit organization operated exclusively in cyberspace, offers around-the-clock, one-stop assistance with Internet investigation and education needs.

Can't sort out where harassing e-mail messages are coming from? Unsure where to look for a child suspected of being abducted by an online chat partner? Cyberangels can and do. And they do it for free.

According to Cyberangels executive director Parry Aftab, the group offers law enforcement the opportunity to "get real expertise when and where they need it at a moment's notice. We have multilingual capability, multicultural sensitivity, and technical expertise all over the world."

Aftab estimates that each day Cyberangels reports 50 child pornography sites to authorities, provides assistance to more than 600 cyberstalking victims, and circulates within its executive levels 2,000 e-mail requests for help. The organization has worked with various national and international law enforcement agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Customs Service, New Jersey State Police, New York Attorney General's Office, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Scotland Yard, and Tokyo Metropolitan Police.

"There are certain groups that find good and bad [World Wide] Web sites, certain groups that deal with cyberstalkers, and certain groups that train law enforcement," says Aftab, who is also a lawyer who specializes in the Internet. "We're the only one that does it all, from our cyber-911 line, to finding missing kids, to giving advice to someone who's going to physically meet someone they met online."

One of Cyberangels' busiest departments is its Law Enforcement Operations Division, headed by Richard Riley. The division tracks and traces the source of problems and then turns that information over to the appropriate authorities.

"We take the tough cases that need to move quickly, like missing kids and pedophiles trying to lure kids," Riley says. "We gather all of the information we can as fast as we can and turn it over to agencies that have responsibility for persons in that area."

The 650-member Law Enforcement Operations Division includes almost 200 law enforcement officers from around the world who volunteer their time as part of the Cyberangels' Net Patrol. This "patrol" is divided into four teams:

- **Child Pornography.** This team follows up on tips about such Web sites. Members inspect the sites, and if a site is verified as a child pornography site, the link is turned over to law enforcement.
- **Hacking Team.** This team assists victims whose computer systems have been hacked into.

OTHER ANGEL DIVISIONS

Cyberangels' executive director Parry Aftab considers her organization to be a resource equally for law enforcement and the general public. Among the other programs offered by the organization are:

Net education. Includes a variety of online classes related to general Internet know-how, online security, and safety and privacy.

Cyber Moms and Dads. Monitors chat rooms, online services, and popular Web sites to ensure safety.

Cyberangels Kids and Teens. Devoted to safety and public out-reach. Teens speak to community groups and students about navigating the Web safely. [Editor's note: Beginning January 1, 2001, the Cyberangels' children's safety and cybercrime programs moved to Wired Kids (www.wiredkids.org), another nonprofit organization of which Cyberangels is a part.]

KIDList Team. Searches the Internet to identify sites that promote pedophilia or that link to sites that do.

- **Help Desk.** This team offers basic assistance to users whose systems have become infected with viruses. In addition, the team offers assistance to those who have other computer security concerns. For example, Riley receives approximately 30 e-mail messages each day from parents who are concerned about their children chatting online or whose children were bilked out of money in Internet auctions.
- **Cyberstalking.** This team assists individuals who receive harassing or threatening e-mails—or other “electronic” attacks from strangers.

Tracking Down Offenders

Many cybercrimes, including cyberstalking, that occur via e-mail, electronic greeting cards, or in chatrooms, are traceable through “headers.” These headers can be the dates, times, e-mail addresses, or nicknames that are affixed to communications as they travel through various Internet service providers (ISPs). This information generally can be traced to an individual user’s account, which will have his/her name, address, and additional billing information.

When a suspect source has been traced, Cyberangels’ Law Enforcement Operations Division issues a report detailing the respective time stamps and log information, and then forwards the information to either the victim or law enforcement. If the information goes directly to the victim, Cyberangels advises the individual to also contact his/her local law enforcement agency and victim assistance unit. If the case file goes to a law enforcement agency, Riley’s team explains the data collection process to the officers receiving the file so they can see how the Cyberangels team arrived at its conclusion. Cyberangels may also advise law enforcement on writing subpoenas to obtain the appropriate information from ISPs.

At this point, Cyberangels’ role is complete “unless law enforcement has a question about how the search process was done,” Riley says. “They don’t need me in court because the officers can look at the files on the victim’s computer, understand them, and testify to them. All we are is an information source. The law enforcement side of the equation is left to the law enforcement agencies.”

“We’re very careful about not treading on their turf,” stresses Aftab. Although many of the organization’s volunteers are members of law enforcement, they do not act as law enforcement while investigating complaints, due in part to jurisdiction issues. And, at no time do Cyberangel volunteers use aliases, contact suspects, pose as children, or operate in any undercover fashion.

Because of the magnitude of the Internet, Det. Sgt. Dan Hurley of the New Jersey State Police’s High Technology Crimes Investigations and Support Unit agrees that law enforcement agencies and outside organizations

should find ways to work together without stepping on each other’s toes. “We have similar functions as well as distinct, separate functions,” he says. “Cyberangels has more of an educational function, but if they come across information of interest to law enforcement, they take on a referral function.”

With regard to child pornography, Cyberangels primarily performs a prescreening function. When volunteers receive tips or discover child pornography while surfing the Web, the sites are screened, tracked, and traced to a source. That information is then turned over to law enforcement for followup.

Training and Resources

As technical as the Internet may seem, Aftab and Riley both say tracking down cybercrime offenders is still a matter of basic, old-fashioned police work, like using phone numbers to identify and locate possible suspects. The challenge is making law enforcement officers savvy enough to follow the clues. “There are small police forces that don’t even have e-mail addresses,” Aftab says. “We need to simplify [the medium] so cyber-forensics make as much sense to the street cop as to the FBI specialist.”

To that end, Cyberangels is exploring funding possibilities to support an interactive online training program that will teach law enforcement how to deal with all aspects of cybercrime, including how to teach Internet safety in schools, when to call Federal officials into investigations, and how to write cybercrime-related subpoenas. The classes would be conducted in password-protected chatrooms free of charge.

Riley, who is developing the curriculum, stresses the budgetary need for this online service. “A small department of 10 to 12 guys in rural Nebraska doesn’t have the budget to bring in someone to train them to do this. If we can do it electronically, they spend money only for two phone calls, and we give them the experience to work crimes in their district or city,” he says.

Lt. George Wintle of Texas’ Colony Police Department says he’s “very pleased” with the training his department is receiving from Cyberangels. “We’re learning how to track where e-mail originally comes from because an e-mail [message] can pass through many doorways so you never know who is sending it. The training is showing us what to look for in the e-mail headings.”

Wintle learned about Cyberangels after receiving a complaint about e-mail harassment from a resident of his community of 25,000. “We didn’t know how to find out who the offender was,” he says. Without the help of Cyberangels, the best his force would have been able to do was to advise the complainant he/she could possibly have blocked the e-mail through his/her ISP. Instead, Cyberangels returned the tracking information within 2 days.

"I was a little surprised with this," he says. "Usually when you deal with groups on the Internet, there's always a catch. There wasn't in this case."

Additional training will be provided to officers in The Colony's D.A.R.E. program, enabling officers to teach Internet safety in schools. That's a role wholeheartedly supported by New Jersey's Hurley.

"One of Cyberangels' best assets is its preventive aspects," Hurley says. "We work with them as far as putting out information to parents, teachers, and other civic groups as a way to prevent children from becoming victims of the Internet. The preservation of computer evidence is vital to law enforcement, so any educational information for potential victims is appreciated."

Volunteer Qualifications

Cyberangels trains its volunteers in the organization's mission and online privacy. Specific assignments depend on the technical know-how each volunteer brings to the group. Volunteers who work in the law enforcement operations group must be 18 years of age and provide proof of identity and a letter from their local law enforcement agency stating they are employed in good standing and have no criminal record. However, Aftab says this particular screening process will soon be stepped up to include a full background check conducted by the FBI. Once approved, volunteers train in groups and are closely monitored by the organization to ensure competency and professionalism. Police clearances are also needed for volunteers who work with children. Volunteers younger than age 18 must submit letters from both their parents and their school.

Past, Present, and Future

Cyberangels was initially formed in the mid-1990s as part of the New York-based Alliance of Guardian Angels. The Internet group disbanded in 1997 but reformed in June 1998 when Aftab took leadership. Since then, Cyberangels has grown to include approximately 7,200 volunteers in 70 countries. In 1998 the group was recognized by the Points of Light Foundation as a recipient of the President's Service Award.

As of January 1, 2001, Cyberangels Law Enforcement Operations will be handled through cyberlawenforcement.com.

The National Law Enforcement and
Corrections Technology Center System
Your Technology Partner
www.justnet.org
800-248-2742

A CYBERANGEL TIP

Wondering how to handle a cybercrime? Richard Riley, Director of Law Enforcement Operations for Cyberangels, recommends ongoing contact with district and States' attorneys regarding Internet law.

"Get to know your district attorneys. Let them know what you're planning, and ask them how to go about it," he says. "Get to know what laws are on the books in your State that cover these crimes. Your D.A. can tell you which way to charge it and how to build the case."

In fact, one of the biggest drawbacks in prosecuting online harassment is that most States do not have cyberstalking laws. In lieu of those, Riley says, law enforcement is often forced to charge cyberstalkers with harassment with telecommunications devices.

A summary of Federal and State laws against cyberstalking appears on the Cyberangels' Web site, www.cyberangels.org.

Although encouraged by the organization's recent growth, Aftab views it with mixed feelings. "I sincerely hope that Cyberangels will be out of business in 5 years. I hope this is a stopgap measure until law enforcement gets the necessary training and regular individuals know how to safely use the Internet."

For more information about Cyberangels, log on to the organization's Web site at www.cyberangels.org. Or, e-mail Parry Aftab at Parry@Aftab.com. Aftab is also the author of *The Parent's Guide to Protecting Your Child in Cyberspace*, which serves as the basis of the Cyberangels' online safety program. Proceeds from the sale of the book help support the organization.



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