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GPS seen as way to aid abuse victims

Massachusetts model may be used in Illinois

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BOSTON — The young mother's long nightmare began to subside soon after her abusive ex-husband was outfitted with a satellite monitoring device that would electronically warn authorities if he ever got too close to her.

The woman, who requested anonymity, can now drive her children to the store again without going 45 minutes out of her way to avoid him. She can leave her home in eastern Massachusetts without agonizing about whether it would be better to wear a wig, or whether she could reach a police station if she saw him following her.

She says she has a life again, thanks to the small global-positioning device clipped to the belt of a man who she feared would kill her.

"Because he went on GPS, I got to go back to school," said the woman, who lives on the front line of an innovative Massachusetts program that uses GPS monitoring for those who violate orders of protection. "I got to raise two beautiful kids."

The Illinois House on Thursday unanimously passed legislation that would allow judges to order GPS monitoring for those who violate orders of protection. The proposed law is modeled on the statute in Massachusetts, one of only a handful of states with experience using the high-tech system to track those accused of domestic violence.

Approved more than a year ago, the Massachusetts monitoring system has proved most effective in the Newburyport area northeast of Boston, where experts say the results have been excellent. So far, none of the eight people outfitted with GPS there have violated protective orders, authorities say.

The effort in Illinois was prompted by last month's slaying of Cindy Bischof, 43, an Elmhurst real estate broker who was shot to death outside her office by a former boyfriend, who then turned the pistol on himself. Michael Giroux was twice charged with violating Bischof's restraining order.

GPS is not a panacea. But women whose attackers have been fitted with it, and advocates and researchers who have studied electronic monitoring, say the technology can turn the tables on people under orders of protection.

"It's really what the technology does to the mind of the batterer more than anything else, and if they realize that there will be very concrete evidence of their violating the restrictions, they are less likely to do so," said Edna Erez, head of the criminal justice department at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Massachusetts has been using GPS monitoring for sex offenders since 2005, and in late 2006 started using it for those accused of domestic violence or stalking.

In the Bay State program, a GPS-fitted cell phone checks where someone is once a minute, and transmits that data to three central tracking centers every five minutes, said Paul Lucci, deputy commissioner of the Massachusetts Probation Service.

A companion ankle bracelet connects wirelessly to the phone and ensures the person is always carrying it. If the person wearing the GPS device moves into a restricted area—such as near a victim's home or workplace, or if the bracelet is cut, or the cell phone left even a few feet away, authorities are alerted. They're also warned if the phone's batteries are low.

In a small office in a government building in Boston—one of the three state monitoring centers—several state probation employees watched computer screens and made calls to people on probation or parole fitted with the GPS devices. The operation is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

When someone enters an area from which they are barred—they're called "exclusion zones"—an alert is set off, and a probation employee tries to contact the person being tracked on the GPS cell phone, Lucci said. If that doesn't work, a parole officer is contacted, and an arrest warrant can be issued.

Although the Illinois legislation would require victims to be automatically contacted if a potential attacker moves into a restricted area, a woman in Massachusetts is contacted by authorities only if required by court order. Some critics say that is a flaw.

Despite these and other gaps in the Massachusetts system, it's working in areas like Newburyport, where GPS tracking is recommended by a team of law enforcement and social service workers who review all domestic violence cases in the area. Not everyone is enthusiastic about GPS monitoring. Fathers' rights groups are skeptical of protection orders and even more wary of monitoring.

"These things, the protection orders, they're a license to dehumanize somebody," said Mark Charalambous, a spokesman for the state's Fatherhood Coalition.

But the young mother who went back to school and another woman said GPS tracking protected them and dramatically changed the quality of their lives. Both women were helped by the Newburyport team. "At least I could sleep at night when [my ex-husband] was on" GPS tracking, said the second woman, who also asked not to have her name used.

Some women such as Mary Rieves, 47, of Boston, look forward to taking advantage of the system. Rieves said she has had protection orders against her ex-boyfriend since 1993. If he ever is released from jail, she hopes he is fitted with a GPS device.

"Why should I, the victim, have to alter myself?" Rieves said.

In Springfield on Thursday, the House sent the legislation to the Senate on a 114-0 vote after Rep. Suzanne Bassi (R- Rolling Meadows), the sponsor, reminded lawmakers that Bischof "lived in constant fear of this coward."

As the chamber quieted, Bassi recounted how Bischof wore a panic button around her neck and had security cameras and an alarm system installed but that her effort "still wasn't enough."

Several lawmakers said they hoped Bischof's death would not be in vain, that the legislation soon will become a law that helps others fight what one lawmaker called a "reign of terror."

"Something now has to change to help these people so we do not hear on the radio of another woman who was found dead by someone who has attacked her . . ." said Rep. Patricia Bellock (R-Hinsdale).

Tribune reporter Ray Long contributed to this report.

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