

Working the pawn-shop beat is paying off, Fridley cop says

The police department finds that its recent emphasis on the city's pawn shops is catching more thieves, but at least one of the shops is still skeptical.

Sarah McCann, Star Tribune

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Two months ago, the Fridley Police Department added a full-time job for one purpose: to find stolen property pawned at the local Pawn America and Cash-N-Pawn.

Pawn shops balked at how it was being paid for -- with an increase in fees the shops pay - - and some people wondered whether the move was based on necessity or misconceptions.

Detective Barry Pankonin took the job and said he's keeping busy.

"I never imagined that there would be this much," he said.

"I think there's enough work for two people."

His work has led to 17 people being charged with pawning stolen property. Compare that to two people charged in the same period last year. Among the items, which ranged from \$30 to \$1,000 in value, were a laptop, a gun, heirloom jewelry, car stereos and DVD players.

Alan Cross, chief financial officer of Cash-N-Pawn, said it's too early to draw conclusions about the need for Pankonin's job.

"I don't think it's a full-time job for sure," he said.

"I would guess if we looked at the dollar amounts, those [stolen] items still represent less than 1 percent [of our business]."

He said officers confiscated stolen property at his store four times in January and February, compared to 18 during the same period last year.

Pankonin agreed that confiscations are down. He thinks criminals may be staying away from the regulated pawn shops.

The Police Department added the position because officers said the shops required more oversight, even though they are operating clean businesses. Many cities, including Fridley, require pawn shops to use a database called Automated Pawn System (APS). The system records information from customers' photo identification and a description of the items being pawned, allowing officers to check for stolen goods. Fridley pawn shops

used to pay \$1.50 per transaction to help pay for the database, but now they pay \$3, and \$2 of that goes toward the new pawn detective.

Pankonin said the job is important because it helps people get their stolen property back and because people who pawn to support a drug habit are more likely to require law enforcement intervention. He says that almost everybody who steals and pawns does so to buy drugs.

The oversight is also keeping the pawn-shop employees on their toes, he said. Pankonin has found sloppy mistakes made by employees entering data into APS. Regular auditing of the system ensures more accurate recording, he said.

Cross, of Cash-N-Pawn, said that although the pawn shops continue to be troubled by the fees and privacy intrusion, "we want to cooperate and do as good a job as we can. We're trying to learn to work with them."

Pankonin wants to spread the word about his work to other departments and eventually form a network of pawn-shop investigators.

"The thief will go from pawning something at Coon Rapids one day and the next day they'll be down in Bloomington or Shakopee," he said. "Communication among law enforcement is key."

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