



Tech crimes center to open FBI site first of its kind in BR

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Identity thieves, child pornographers, hackers, fraudsters and other cyber criminals have a new foe in town: a Cybercrimes Command Center.

The FBI is establishing the command center on the LSU campus, where it will be home to a task force of federal agents, city and parish detectives and forensic examiners who investigate computer-related crime.

It also will house a laboratory capable of processing computer evidence for law-enforcement agencies throughout the region.

The FBI plans to spend \$300,000 to renovate and equip the former Wetlands Biogeochemistry Laboratory near South Campus Drive. The 5,000-square-foot facility is expected to open sometime this fall.

The center is the first of its kind for Baton Rouge, and is intended to boost an already growing caseload of high profile high-tech crimes in the region.

“The criminal element in all facets is moving into the cyberworld,” said James Bernazzani, special agent in charge of the FBI’s New Orleans office. “The terrorists use it, fraud guys use it, violent criminals use it, drug cartels use it, street gangs use it. We’ve got to be ahead of the curve.”

Nationwide, cybercrime is the FBI’s third-highest priority — ranking just behind anti-terrorism and foreign counterintelligence and ranking above public corruption.

The Cybercrimes Command Center comes two years after the Baton Rouge FBI and local law-enforcement agencies formed an alliance to collaborate on computer-related investigations. The seven-member “working group” consists of agents and detectives from the Baton Rouge and LSU police departments, East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff’s Office and Louisiana Attorney General’s Office who routinely work cases together.

The command center comes as investigators in the region increasingly are encountering computers and other gadgets as crime scenes:

- On New Year’s Eve, East Baton Rouge Parish deputies arrested Edyce Stone Rodriguez, a 41-year-old high school chemistry teacher, for allegedly forging Social Security cards, Department of Justice work-authorization cards and driver’s licenses from three Central American countries.

- In October, 29-year-old Californian Alejandro Vasquez admitted to luring a 13-year-old Zachary girl to Texas for sex through an Internet chat room. He is scheduled for sentencing in Baton Rouge federal court on Feb. 3.
- Last summer, the FBI and LSU Police Department arrested former LSU Associate Dean James C. Welles after a federal grand jury indicted him on child pornography charges. Investigators allege they have discovered 27,000 images on computers seized from his Baton Rouge and New Orleans homes.

Bernazzani said the facility's resources will allow authorities to "match the abilities of the bad guys who use cyber." Baton Rouge U.S. Attorney David Dugas said a Cybercrimes Command Center has been a goal since the FBI and local law enforcement agencies formed the alliance two years ago.

"This means we'll have full-time dedicated agents working cybercrime," Dugas said. "That will be a tremendous boost for the Baton Rouge area and for the entire state."

Supervisory Special Agent Will Hatcher, who oversees cybercrimes investigations for the FBI in Louisiana, said there also has been talk with LSU of developing a curriculum in computer science forensics, using the new center as a training ground. Area law-enforcement authorities hope the center will help expedite their growing caseloads.

Sheriff's Office Lt. Col. Bud Connor said the agency's financial crimes and computer operations divisions have quadrupled in size in the past few years – and still are in need of more investigators. The Sheriff's Office now has two in-house forensic specialists and plans to send more deputies for the high-tech training.

Even so, he said, the agency often has cybercrime cases stacked up, awaiting forensic investigation.

"I can't see how this would be a bad thing," Connor said of the proposed facility. "You won't ever hear me say we have too many cops and not enough crimes to go around. The technical end of investigations is growing; there's no question it's the wave of the future. This thing is overdue and we welcome it."

LSU Police Major Ricky Adams said his agency's own forensic laboratory inside the university computing center, which routinely assists federal and local investigators, is "having difficulty taking on new cases because it's running out of space to store new evidence and struggling to work in a small area."

"We've seen a demand for the services of the lab increase and we all agree it's necessary to expand the operations," Adams said. "So many search warrants today now routinely ask for a computer, and that has to be examined by someone. We've entered a new era."