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Startup makes picture messaging a safety tool

Wed Oct 22, 2008 4:32 PM EDT

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"Don't try to hurt me — I've deposited a letter with my lawyer. If he doesn't hear from me within 24 hours, he will mail it to the police. It details all your murky dealings."

That hard-boiled plot device from detective novels and movies is coming to life in a free service called My Mobile Witness from a startup in Pittsburgh.

It works like this: When you're in a situation you're uneasy about — say you're letting a stranger into the house — snap a picture of the person with your phone and message it to My Mobile Witness. Or just tap out a text message. My Mobile Witness time-stamps and stores the message, and if you end up getting into trouble, it gives law enforcement access to your "vault" of messages.

The main idea is that if a situation turns ugly, you can let the threatening person know that "Hey, I just took and sent a picture of your face/car/license plate to a place where the police will find it." Just like in the movies, but with a picture message instead of a letter. Threats will do no good — the sender can't retrieve the message or erase it from My Mobile Witness' vault.

Police can access the vault without a subpoena or court order if they go through "Fusion Centers" that coordinate state law enforcement efforts.

The founders, Marcus Anthony and Scott Bullens, came up with the idea when they bought a real-estate firm and became concerned with the safety of their agents. They made it a policy that their employees had to take pictures of the clients they were meeting and send them to the office.

Ron Knight, a former FBI agent who's a security consultant for the startup, cautioned that the service is no replacement for a 911 call in an immediately threatening situation.

The service is free for users, but the firm says it may e-mail them once or twice a month with messages from sponsors.



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