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Parking attendants trained to watch for terrorists

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Parking attendants and meter maids could be the nation's latest line of defense against terrorist attacks.

A new government program aims to train thousands of parking industry employees nationwide to watch for and report anything suspicious -- abandoned cars, for example, or people hanging around garages, taking photographs or asking unusual questions.

Organizers say parking attendants and enforcement officers are as important to thwarting attacks as the two Times Square street vendors who alerted police to a smoking SUV that was found to contain a gasoline-and-propane bomb.

"We can no longer afford as a nation to say, 'It doesn't impact me or my family, so therefore I'm not getting involved,'" Bill Arrington of the Transportation Security Administration told parking industry professionals at a convention this week in Las Vegas. "We're saying, 'Please, sir, get involved.'"

The program has been in the works for about a year and gave its first presentation at the convention, attended by hundreds of people who run parking operations for cities, universities, stadiums and other places around the country.

Funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and administered by TSA, the program teaches parking lot operators to watch for odd activities that could precede an attack by days or months: strange odors such as diesel from gasoline vehicles, cars parked where they shouldn't be, people who seem to be conducting surveillance by taking photos or drawing sketches.

Would-be terrorists may attempt to gain access to sensitive places or materials by applying for jobs or asking employees strange questions, said Jeff Beatty, a former FBI and CIA agent who led the training in Las Vegas.

The program is part of a larger effort by the government since 9/11 to enlist ordinary people -- airline passengers, subway riders, bus drivers, truckers, doormen, building superintendents -- to serve as the eyes and ears of law enforcement.

Beatty said the idea is not to turn ordinary people into government agents. "You're not going to be Jack Bauer. You're not going to be James Bond," he said. But he said terror attacks like the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people often are preceded by warning signs. For example, Timothy McVeigh parked a getaway car in an alley near the Oklahoma City federal building with a note asking that it not be towed. He practiced walking from where he would park the truck to his car to time how long it would take to escape.

Similarly, in the attempted Times Square bombing, the SUV was parked illegally on the street, its engine running.

Garages nationwide stepped up security after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, in which terrorists parked an explosives-laden truck in an underground garage. Six people were killed and hundreds injured.

Many parking lot managers across the nation are already keenly aware of the threat and train their employees on what to watch for.

In New York, Jose Vega, manager of a Central Parking System garage near Times Square, said the police come by once a year to brief the employees.

"They tell us to look for abandoned cars," Vega said.

Tom Lozich, executive director of corporate security for MGM Mirage, which owns all or part of 11 casino-resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, said all new hires, including parking valets, housekeepers and casino cashiers, are trained to watch for signs of terrorism.

City employees who write parking tickets and operate lots in Boulder, Colo., will go through the antiterror training. Molly Winter, the city's parking services director, said: "A lot of this is just developing a sense of personal responsibility about things that just don't seem right."

But some parking lot attendants say they are not the best people to identify suspicious activity. Nancy Montanez, an attendant in a Miami parking garage, said she spends most of her time scanning tickets, running credit cards and printing receipts.

"It's a good idea, but it would be kind of difficult because when the cars come here, they're not here for really long," she said. "They're here maybe not even a minute during the period of time that I charge them and they exit."

Associated Press writers Karen Matthews and Colleen Long in New York and Sarah Larimer in Miami contributed to this report.

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