

Help at the touch of a button: handset gives abuse victims direct line to police

Portable alarm system offers security outdoors

Nic Fildes

Eight police forces are planning to adopt a new portable alarm system designed to protect victims of domestic abuse that are at serious risk of violence when they leave their homes.

The system, called TecSOS and developed by Vodafone, has been tested by Thames Valley Police over recent months. Now 1,000 of the devices will be provided to women considered to be at high risk of attack.

The device works in a similar way to the fixed alarms that are installed in the homes of the victims of domestic abuse but gives the potential target more security outdoors.

The device, which looks like an ordinary mobile phone, sends a distress call to the emergency services when a button is depressed and can be activated covertly in a person's pocket.

It is the first time that such a sophisticated portable system has been adopted in Britain.

Signals from the device will be given the highest priority in a police force's call centre and an incoming call immediately brings up the victim's history on the operator's screen to save time.

The individual concerned does not need to speak to be identified as the TecSOS handset is linked to their record. The device automatically sends an approximate location of the victim to the police and also starts recording the incident, which can be later used as evidence without the victim necessarily having to appear in court.

Trials were carried out using 30 people who had suffered domestic abuse in the Thames Valley. During the trial, the devices were activated on five occasions.

Vodafone, through its Vodafone Foundation charitable arm, will invest almost £1 million extending the service across the eight regions. It hopes to make the service available nationwide.

Helen Ball, assistant chief constable of Thames Valley Police, said that the portable element of the device was crucial in restoring a victim's sense of confidence outside the home. "Victims have workplaces, school runs and places to go, so having a mobile device is tremendously important," she told *The Times*.

One of the women who tested the handset said she had activated the device after an encounter with a violent ex-partner and the police arrived in around five minutes. "It does give you your life back. You don't have to be a prisoner in your own home," she said.

Although domestic violence often



Violence in numbers

1 in 4

women experience some form of domestic violence at some point in their lives

1,400

cases of domestic violence are reported every day

2

people die in Britain every week as a result of domestic violence

30-35

assaults suffered on average before a victim reports domestic abuse

Source: Thames Valley Partnership

happens in the home, ex-partners or family members will often stalk or ambush their victims in public.

John Liversage, who managed the project alongside the police for the Thames Valley Partnership organisation, said that TecSOS has already had an impact on its users' confidence.

"Some victims would not venture outside the front door. If you want to get them back to normality then this device helps," he said.

Mr Liversage said that the 30 users were polled, on a scale of one to ten, about their fears over personal safety

before and after using the device. The average score after the three-month trial fell from 7.6 to 4 from as a result of owning a TecSOS handset.

The system was developed in Spain by Vodafone alongside the Red Cross and is currently used by more than 9,000 victims. Since 2005, it has been used by almost 29,000 victims of domestic abuse and more than 200,000 calls have been logged.

However, the device had to be adapted to work with the British 999 emergency call system which cannot yet accept GPS co-ordinates. A more

basic system using mobile phone numbers — called "Eastings & Northings" — has been implemented which provides the location of the device to within metres. The device also needed to be integrated into the existing system handling emergency calls in Britain whereas the Spanish, via the Red Cross, established dedicated centres.

The service will be rolled out by Metropolitan Police in London as well as in Surrey, Essex, Sussex, Kent, Gwent, Hampshire and the Thames Valley by the end of the year.