

Wireless providers to disable stolen phones

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Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Julius Genachowski speaks during a news conference to announce an effort to crack down on smartphone theft at the Wilson Building in Washington, DC. Genachowski said the four leading carriers had agreed to set up their own databases of stolen phones within six months.

(AP) -- Major wireless service companies have agreed to disable cellphones after they are reported stolen under a strategy intended to deter the theft and resale of wireless devices.

The system announced Tuesday relies on a centralized database that officials hope to be operating within six months. The database will record smartphones' unique identifying numbers. That way, wireless carriers that receive a report of a stolen smartphone will be able to recognize the device and block it from being used again.

"We're sending a message to consumers that we've got your back and a

message to criminals that we're cracking down on the stolen phone" market, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski said in announcing the new strategy with several big-city police chiefs and a wireless industry representative.

Major U.S. cities have been reporting increases in smartphone thefts as criminals steal devices to resell - sometimes overseas - as part of sophisticated operations. Officials say that cellphones are now taken in 38 percent of all robberies in Washington, and more than 40 percent of robberies in New York City involve phones. Many of the robberies are violent, resulting in either serious injury or sometimes death, police say.

D.C. Police Chief Cathy Lanier said her department had devoted considerable resources in recent months to the problem, but "that's just not enough, not in a crime as complex as this one is."

Cellphone carriers covering roughly 90 percent of U.S. subscribers are participating, the FCC said.

The goal is to render stolen cellphones useless, drying up the market for them and removing the incentive to steal them.

"What we're announcing here today will make a stolen cellphone about as worthless as an empty wallet," said Sen. Charles Schumer, who called smartphones "catnip for criminals" because they're valuable, exposed and easy to steal.

Schumer, D-N.Y., is sponsoring legislation that would make it a federal crime to tamper with smartphones' unique identifying numbers.

New York Police Commissioner Ray Kelly said cellphone thefts have been a persistent problem in the city even as other crime has dropped in the last decade. He likened the new approach to "draining the swamp to

fight malaria."

The FCC said smartphone manufacturers will also implement automatic prompts that encourage users to lock their devices with a password. The industry has also agreed to create a campaign educating consumers about how to protect their cellphones and to release quarterly updates on their progress.

Officials wouldn't say how much the initiative would cost.

Christopher Guttman-McCabe of CTIA-The Wireless Association, an organization representing the wireless communications industry, said, "It certainly won't be without costs, but we don't think about cost in this context."

"This is about safety and security," he added.

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