

# Is DHS's 'If You See Something, Say Something' campaign helpful or burdensome?

By [Sofia Resnick](#) | 02.16.11 | 4:36 pm

The message "If you see something, say something," will be plastered on television and posters throughout the Staples Center this weekend at the NBA All-Star game as part of a recent partnership announced Tuesday between the National Basketball Association and the Department of Homeland Security. Officials said the campaign partnership will "tip off" during the NBA's "Jam Session" events.

The initiative is a move to ask Americans to help local law enforcement by keeping their eyes peeled for "suspicious activity," DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano and NBA Commissioner David Stern told press at the Verizon Center in Washington, D.C. The emphasis toward civilian "[suspicious activity reporting](#)" has surged in recent years, but advertising campaigns and high-profile partnerships have really begun to take off.

In December, DHS joined forces with Wal-Mart, launching the 'If You See Something, Say Something' campaign initially in 230 Wal-Mart stores, with a target of 588 sites in 27 states. A short video plays at select checkout stations, telling shoppers to call local police if they see something suspicious. (The term "suspicious," by the way, is rarely elaborated on or defined by DHS in campaign messages.)



Moving on to sports, DHS partnered with the NFL with its campaign at the Super Bowl in Dallas early this month. And now the NBA.

"We hope that this partnership will emphasize basically that security is a shared responsibility," said NBA Commissioner David Stern at yesterday's press event. "We think that sports is a terrific way to send messages, and to get people who go to events to focus on this very important message."

Or maybe Napolitano is just a big sports fan.

"Our partnership with the NBA to bring the 'If You See Something, Say Something' campaign to professional basketball events throughout the nation is a vital part of our efforts to ensure the safety of players, employees and fans," she told the press.

Inquiries have begun over how effective these campaigns are at protecting the country from terrorism. With sports fans and budget-conscious shoppers reporting “suspicious” activities every 10 minutes, does that help the security agencies or overwhelm the system?

David Rittgers, a legal policy analyst for the Cato Institute, said he thinks the national security agencies are overwhelmed with information.

“While there is value in getting a person on the street to be aware and report suspicious activities, you can also create too many false positives,” Rittgers said.

Rittgers said the Federal Bureau of Investigations receives about 700 messages a day, and the National Counterterrorism Center receives about 10,000 pieces of information daily. Clogging the system with even more reports of indiscriminate “suspicious activities” won’t necessarily bring these agencies closer to the information they need to prevent terrorist plots.

“People talk about connecting dots,” he said. “But it’s knowing which dots to connect that has value. .... The commitment to simply collect all the dots might not be as useful as a lot of people would propose.”

For example: “It’s not illegal to purchase a ski mask, it’s not illegal to purchase a gun, it’s not illegal to sit outside a bank. But it’s when you put those all together.”

The measure of success is still to be seen, but meanwhile the money is flowing.

“If You See Something, Say Something” are now being posted all over the country, according the DHS: on 9,000 federal buildings nationwide, at [the Mall Of America](#), the American Hotel & Lodging Association, Amtrak, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and the general aviation industry.

DHS allocated \$2.9 million for the campaign in 2009, but an official told [CNSNews.com](#) that the agency has only spent \$500,000 on the campaign to date, saying it is focusing its efforts on partnerships — outsourcing security, if you will. And while Napolitano told the network the campaign has resulted in the launch of several investigations, she said it’s still difficult to measure whether it will effectively deter would-be terrorists.