GPS pays off for cities as it tracks workers

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ISLIP, N.Y. -- GPS tracking devices installed on government-issue vehicles are helping communities around the country reduce waste and abuse, in part by catching employees shopping, working out at the gym or otherwise loafing while on the clock.

The use of GPS has led to firings, stoking complaints from employees and unions that the devices are intrusive, Big Brother technology. But city officials say that monitoring employees' movements has deterred abuses, saving the taxpayers money in gasoline and lost productivity.

"We can't have public resources being used on private activities. That's Management 101," said Phil Nolan, supervisor of the Long Island town of Islip.

Islip saved nearly 14,000 gallons of gas over a three-month period from the previous year after GPS devices were installed. Nolan said that shows employees know they are being watched and are no longer using Islip's 614 official vehicles for personal business.

Some administrators around the country emphasized that the primary purpose of the GPS devices is not to catch people goofing off but to improve the maintenance and operation of the vehicles and to design more efficient bus, snowplow and trash-pickup routes. Among other things, the devices can be used to alert mechanics that a car's engine is operating inefficiently.

Still, in Indiana, six employees of the Fort Wayne-Allen County Health Department lost their jobs last year after an administrator bought three Global Positioning Satellite devices out of her own pocket and switched them in and out of 12 department vehicles to nail health inspectors running personal errands on the job.

Employees were caught going to stores, gyms, restaurants, churches and their homes. (And the administrator was reimbursed the $750 she spent.)

One of those who got in trouble, 27-year employee Elaine Pruitt, decried what she called "sneaky" methods. She said she had fallen ill and stopped at her home for a long lunch break, returning to work just 38 minutes late.

Previously, "as long as we got our work done, there was never any problem. All of a sudden, it became wrong if you stopped at a grocery store for some gum," she said.

In Boston two years ago, a snowplow driver was accused of hiding his GPS device in a snowbank and then going off to do some private plowing. The driver pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor larceny charge and was fined $300.
In Denver, 76 vehicles equipped with GPS this year were driven 5,000 fewer miles than the unequipped fleet had during the same period the year before. Denver plans to outfit police cars, snowplows and trash trucks with GPS soon.

"It's growing by leaps and bounds," said Chris Ransom of Networkcar, one of the country's leading providers of GPS systems. "I'd say we're seeing double-digit growth among the municipalities, whether it's statewide or down to the local county."

In Delaware, GPS was used to confirm that two employees using state vehicles were going home early, said Terry Barton Jr., fleet administrator for the state. He would not say what action, if any, was taken against the employees.