Here's what to know about the Citizen crime app as it tests private security

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Citizen, an intriguing crime and neighborhood watch app, is looking into a "pilot project" that could allow users to request private security to scenes.

A program for an in-person, on-demand private security force supposedly has been in the works for months as Citizen is testing "quick response times and instant communication between Citizen and security partners," according to a story first reported by Vice on Friday. A black SUV with Citizen-branded logos has also been seen around Los Angeles, according to a tweet on Wednesday.

A Citizen spokesperson told U.S. TODAY that the company is conducting a "pilot project" with LAPS, or Los Angeles Private Security, an L.A.-based security firm.

"LAPS offers a personal rapid response service that we are trialing internally with employees as a small test with one vehicle in Los Angeles," the Citizen spokesperson said. "For example, if someone would like an escort to walk them home late at night, they can request this service. We have spoken with various partners in designing this pilot project."

The news of Citizen's pilot program comes nearly a week after the app falsely accused a man of starting a wildfire in Los Angeles. The app had offered a $30,000 reward to anyone who could provide information that would lead to the arrest of a man, according to *The New York Times*. Police detained one man whose photo had appeared on the app for up to 15 hours as Citizen said it had mistakenly identified the man. Police later arrested a second man.

Nonetheless, the app's overall mission is "to make your world a safer place." Here's what the app is all about.

What is the Citizen app?

The Citizen app was originally named Vigilante in 2016 by a New York-based corporation called sp0n with a premise to allow regular people to

report on local crimes in their area and broadcast live video from the scene as a possible deterrent.

"What if everyone within a quarter mile of every reported crime were immediately made aware of it? What if there were a camera on every crime? What if transparency existed—if we all knew where crime was occurring and how it was being resolved?" a Citizen blog post had suggested in 2016.

VentureBeat reported that shortly thereafter, the New York Police Department released a statement that said: "Crimes in progress should be handled by the NYPD and not a vigilante with a cell phone."

Apple soon removed Vigilante from its App Store for policy violations.

Vigilante was rebranded as Citizen, debuted in New York City in 2017, in Baltimore and L.A. in early 2019 and then began popping up in other major U.S. cities.

Citizen allows its users to get "the real story from people on the scene," according to the company's website.

The app uses smartphone locations to notify users about possible criminal activity in their area, including those happening in real-time, complete with live footage from users at the scene and live discussions.

Citizen depends on 911 calls and police, fire and emergency radio transmissions and puts them on a map. The app also encourages users to chronicle and stream what's happening from nearby crime scenes if they are able to do so safely.

"We believe in giving people a way to use their phones to protect a neighbor, to prevent a tragedy, and to count on one another. And to

create a safer world for each other, with each other," Citizen's website said.

How widely is Citizen used?

Citizen currently has more than 7 million users who have sent out more than 4 billion alerts. The app is available in major U.S. locales, including:

- Atlanta
- Austin, Texas
- Baltimore
- Charlotte
- Chicago
- Cincinnati
- Cleveland
- Columbus
- Detroit
- Houston
- Indianapolis
- Los Angeles
- Miami-Dade County
- The Minneapolis -St. Paul area
- New York
- Philadelphia
- Phoenix Metro area
- San Diego
- San Francisco Bay Area
- Stockton, Calif.
- Toledo, Ohio
- Tucson, Ariz.

Why has Citizen been criticized?

While the app has raised about $133 million in funding and been praised for partnering with Los Angeles County during the pandemic to create an app for contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also has been criticized for potentially putting people in dangerous situations, such as misidentifying an alleged suspect in the Los Angeles wildfire last week.

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