Oklahoma agency spurs privacy concerns

INTELLIGENCE OFFICES COLLECT INFORMATION ON PEOPLE SUSPECTED OR CONVICTED OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

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Government information-gathering centers intended to thwart domestic terrorist activity could violate individuals' privacy rights and be used to spy on American citizens, representatives of two groups on both ends of the political spectrum say.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which often takes up causes viewed as liberal, and the OK-SAFE group, which supports mostly conservative activities, both are concerned about the growing number of information fusion centers that share information and intelligence with local agencies, as well as the federal government.

"Privacy is really not a left-right issue," said Jay Stanley, an ACLU spokesman in Washington. "We've never had a domestic spy agency in this country that looks over our own population.

"Our concern is that the government is kind of under the radar setting up a whole new set of institutions that threaten to add up to really a domestic intelligence agency — which is something that Americans have never had and never wanted — that will monitor and spy on innocent Americans who aren't involved in wrongdoing," he said. Amanda Teegarden, executive director of the Tulsa-based nonprofit group Oklahomans for Sovereignty and Free Enterprise, said she's worried Oklahoma's center may be tracking information on people who show up to protest the federal government. That could include people attending so-called "tea parties" to speak out against the bailout and economic stimulus packages or those attending congressional town hall meetings to oppose health care reform.

Queries are generated by any suspicious activity, she said.
"It all can be innocent, but it's archived," Teegarden said. "So if you get enough queries archived, then that is a record."

State's privacy policy

Oklahoma's fusion center is based in the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation headquarters in Oklahoma City. It is operated and staffed by the state Office of Homeland Security and OSBI, said David Stenhouse, the center's deputy director.

State and local agencies contribute information to the center, which started operations in April 2008, he said.

Stenhouse, who is with the OSBI, said respecting individuals' privacy rights is important.

Oklahoma's center has adopted a detailed privacy policy, he said.

Various state and local agencies collect information on people suspected or convicted of criminal activity, he said. The idea is to keep tabs on those who previously committed violent acts or are showing indications they are planning terrorist acts.

"Domestic terrorism is our primary focus," Stenhouse said.

The center gets information from federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, tribal and campus police, and citizen reports, he said.

"Our goal here is to collect information that is lawful ... in our role to protect this country from attacks," Stenhouse said "People do a lot of things that might be considered odd but not necessarily problematic or illegal. The circumstances of each event dictate how far you go or what you do with that information."

People going to meetings or rallies shouldn't be concerned, he said.

"Those are lawful assemblies. There's nothing wrong with that and there's nothing wrong with people assembling and talking about their concerns," Stenhouse said.

The fusion centers are mostly funded by the U.S. Homeland Security Department.

Teegarden said she's alarmed by the growing number of fusion centers. There were 58 across the country in 2007; now there are 72.

The ACLU earlier this year sent five letters to the Homeland Security Department about memos and reports from the fusion centers that include directing local police to investigate nonviolent political activists and religious groups in Texas, and advocating surveillance of third-party presidential candidate supporters in Missouri.

Stanley said techniques used by the information centers are not effective.

"It just leads to a lot of wasted law enforcement effort," he said.

They're tucking away information, then later using computers to sift through it, trying to identify "so-called suspicious individuals," he said. "Terrorism is just not a frequent enough occurrence in this country that you can really come up with any kind of reliable patterns that will tell you that somebody is planning a terrorist attack."