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Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

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Local law enforcement needs ability to track domestic terrorists

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Like many professionals on the front lines of homeland security, FBI Agent David Heller was concerned about the ability of local, state and federal/tribal agencies to track people of interest in domestic terrorism investigations.

Particularly, Heller was interested in the ability of state agencies to uniformly communicate concerns about possible domestic terrorism suspects, and those agencies’ ability to track those suspects’ movements.

His course paper, titled “Leveraging Technology to Track State, Local & Tribal Domestic Terrorism Subjects,” examined methods for disparate agencies to share information electronically.

1) Heller’s paper highlighted the Law Enforcement National Data Exchange, or N-DEX.

“There are myriad agencies out there that have databases for information sharing,” Heller said from his office in Anchorage, Alaska, where he is the FBI’s Assistant Special Agent in Charge. “The N-DEX was a way to get these agencies that have these data sources to come together and connect them.”

Although N-DEX was not established specifically for tracking domestic terrorism suspects, Heller argued that the system was perfectly structured to do so.

Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies commonly use NCIC to track warrants and arrest, enabling agencies using that database to locate/identify subjects of criminal cases. But when it comes to suspects of domestic terrorism cases only the FBI may enter the adherents name into a proprietary national database known as the Violent Gang/Terrorist Organization File (VGTOF). Subsequently, VGTOF is accessible through NCIC.

For example, if the FBI has a suspected domestic terrorist whom is stopped for speeding in one state, the FBI would be notified. Unfortunately, the local jurisdiction who made the stop may only receive a limited notification within NCIC, unless the adherent posed a risk to officer safety.

State and local agencies may have their own systems for that kind of tracking, but don’t have the capability to do so nationally.

Also, a suspect whose activities may not have aroused suspicions of violating federal law might be of interest to state and local agencies. But there was no electronic mechanism for those state and local agencies to share or receive that kind of information on a national level.

Filling that need, however, also required a balance to protect Constitutional rights and liberties. N-DEX addresses that because of its uniformed procedures and definitions.

2) After writing the paper, Heller facilitated a meeting in Alaska with the stakeholders of N-DEX from West Virginia to discuss how local and state agencies could access and contribute to that national exchange for the purpose of tracking domestic terrorists. Heller was able to explain how the system could be used to benefit local agencies, and how those organizations can leverage the data exchange index.

That turned out to be true not just for suspected terrorists, as Heller envisioned in his paper, but other types of criminal suspects.

A result is that agencies in Alaska are now beginning the process of contributing to N-DEX to share and receive information.

“That’s one of the positive things that came out of the paper,” Heller said.

3) Agencies from a string of states have begun participating in N-DEX: Texas, California, Virginia, Oregon, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Nebraska, Kansas, and West Virginia.

Texas alone has 408 agencies participating that have contributed more than 39 million incidents into N-DEX, for example.

These states retain their own data systems, but are able to utilize N-DEX for information sharing.

N-DEX backers are meeting with fusion centers to enlist their participation in other states, Heller said.

A detective in one state can submit a “marker” on, say, a suspected militia member who the FBI may not be aware of. If that suspect is stopped for speeding in another state and an officer runs a check on him, through N-DEX, the detective from the first state would be notified and be able to track that suspect’s movement as well as warn the agency that made the stop.

Associated file: [Paper: Leveraging Technology to Track State, Local & Tribal Domestic Terrorism Subjects](#)

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