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LAPD Terror-Tip Plan May Serve as Model

By **SIOBHAN GORMAN**
April 15, 2008; Page A3

LOS ANGELES -- A new Los Angeles Police Department program might become a model for plugging a major gap in post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts: ensuring tips about potential terrorist activity are passed from beat cops to federal security officials in Washington.

The nation lacks a standardized system to ensure such information is shared, counterterrorism officials say, even though local police are best positioned to spot suspicious activities. By making a few adjustments to its regular crime reports and devising a new training regimen, the LAPD is now able to relay terror tips up the chain of command, and it will later be able to route them to Washington.

A month into the program, it is fast becoming the "heart and soul" of the LAPD's counterterrorism efforts, Police Chief William Bratton said. Officials in Washington are seizing on the approach because it is simple enough to be used by large and small police departments.

Watchful Eye

Sample of the 65 activities that are now reported to the LAPD's counterterrorism bureau

- Drawing diagrams or taking notes
- Taking measurements
- Engaging security personnel with questions focused on sensitive subjects
- Taking pictures or video footage of no apparent aesthetic value
- Making or attempting to make suspicious purchases of items like pool chemicals or fertilizer
- Acquiring or attempting to acquire uniforms
- Espousing extremist views, such as verbalizing support for terrorism

Source: Office of the Chief of Police, Los Angeles

One potential obstacle: The Los Angeles program is generating heat from civil-liberties groups that say it turns beat cops into spies.

Driving the program is Commander Joan McNamara, the department's No. 2 counterterrorism official. Shortly after taking the job a year ago, she heard Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff refer to the nation's 800,000 police officers as "the cloak of security across America."

When she looked around her department, she says, she thought, "I don't think so."

There was no system for officers to report terror tips garnered from their patrols to the rest of the department, much less to Washington. Cmdr. McNamara set out to fix the problem.

One aide, Sgt. Shannon Paulson, a reservist in Naval intelligence, suggested that police reports include information on incidents that could be connected to a terrorist plot. These "suspicious activity reports" would be routed to analysts at the LAPD's counterterrorism bureau who would assess them and assign codes so the data could be studied. The data could then

be cross-referenced with other databases, to look for patterns.

With a general design in mind, Cmdr. McNamara's team, working out of a converted storage room, pored over cases from around the world to assemble a list of "suspicious activities" that might be included. The team, along with city lawyers, eliminated items they thought weren't tied directly enough to terrorism, such as possession of extremist literature. That left about 65 activities, such as photographing government buildings or displaying overt support for terrorist networks.

Reports about such activities will be sent to Washington once federal officials complete their effort to link to the system, which could be shared with foreign allies. The coding, Cmdr. McNamara said, ensures data will be handled in line with privacy rules.

Cmdr. McNamara's program institutionalizes and measures intelligence produced by the department, said Deputy Chief Michael Downing, who heads the LAPD's counterterrorism division. It also gives police officers a seat at the table. They "no longer feed off the bread crumbs of that table," he said.

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Civil-liberties advocates say such information gathering without evidence of a crime is ineffective and invasive. "That sort of observation of innocuous behavior is completely inappropriate," said Michael German, a former FBI agent who is a national-security specialist with the American Civil Liberties Union. "The last thing the LAPD needs is for the law-abiding community to feel like the police are spying on them."

The city has shelved a program intended to provide outreach to Muslim communities because it was perceived (Mr. Downing says misperceived) as a program to monitor Muslims.

The new program, he and city lawyers say, is different because it focuses solely on behavior historically linked to terrorism, not individual characteristics. It is an approach, Mr. Downing adds, already used to monitor trends in drug trafficking and prostitution, and the information is collected lawfully as part of officers' regular duties.

To check the city's legal assessment, Mr. Downing sent the proposal to privacy lawyers at the information-sharing division in the office of the Director of National Intelligence, the department that oversees most U.S. intelligence operations. Those officials concluded the program made a priority of protecting privacy and should be a national model. They said it protected privacy because the police collect information that could indicate terrorism, as they would with any other crime.

The simplicity of the approach "is resounding with other police departments and is why it's going to be effective in other cities," said Sue Reingold, deputy program manager for the information-sharing division.

As the LAPD begins department-wide training to implement the program, Mr. Downing is working to convince counterterrorism counterparts from 62 other major U.S. cities that they should adopt a similar system so all could compare information. Allaying privacy concerns will be critical to the program's success, Mr. Downing said. But the most persuasive evidence will be what the new program produces. "We need a win," he said.

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