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Out of the loop on terror threats

Homeland Security excludes state, local officials from group that shares data

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WASHINGTON // State and local officials are protesting efforts by the Department of Homeland Security to exclude them from a new unit designed to share information about possible terrorist threats to the country.

The information-sharing group, created by a White House directive last year, is designed to send out bulletins to state and local officials when the federal government learns of terrorist activity at home and abroad.

But Homeland Security officials are opposed to letting representatives of state and local government serve on the unit that would send out the information because they believe it would confuse the process.

The department's opposition puts it at odds with the White House and with other U.S. intelligence agencies, according to state and federal officials and government documents.

It is the latest example of the government's failure to heed one of the most critical lessons of the Sept. 11 attacks: the inability or unwillingness of federal officials to share information with those at the state and local level who might be in a position to help stave off a terrorist attack.

Thomas "Ted" McNamara, who is in charge of information-sharing in the office of the Director of National Intelligence, graded government intelligence-sharing efforts thus far as "just barely 'fair.'" He added: "We're certainly not doing 'good,' and we're not doing 'excellent.'"

At his Senate confirmation hearing yesterday to be director of national intelligence, retired Vice Adm. Mike McConnell said the culture of intelligence agencies must change to appreciate the needs of police chiefs and their colleagues around the country.

"This is a different age and a different time," he said.

Local response

Federal and state officials said the government is still having trouble getting timely and accurate threat information to states and localities so they can decide how to respond - for example, by sending more officers to an airport or border, dispatching K-9 teams or a bomb squad.

Local officials see and use information differently from "somebody who came out of fighting the Cold War against Russia," said former Baltimore Police Commissioner Thomas C. Frazier, who has represented municipal police in discussions over how to assemble the unit.

Historically, information has often been closely held at the federal level until the last minute. Sometimes, alerts come in the middle of the night, making it difficult for mayors and others to

respond before the morning rush hour, said David Sobczyk, a commander with the Chicago Police Department.

"There has to be a leap of faith" to trust local officials with sensitive information, he said.

A White House directive in November, issued with President Bush's approval, was designed to fix these problems.

It called for Homeland Security to create a unit that would assemble terrorism reports specifically for state and local officials. The unit, which could include two or three state or local officials, would issue alerts and identify information important to state and local officials, according to a Homeland Security document obtained by The Sun.

President Bush "has been clear" that he wants state and local representatives included in the unit, said spokesman Scott Stanzel. He said he was confident they would be incorporated.

Homeland Security Department spokesman Russ Knocke declined to comment on the department's position because the issue is still under negotiation, but the document on the unit, which was assembled by Homeland Security and the FBI for senior officials, said that all agencies involved, "with Exception of DHS," agree that state and local officials should participate in the group.

In meetings on the issue, Homeland Security officials have maintained that they will represent the interests of state and local officials and that there is no need to include them directly, according to the senior intelligence official.

Proponents of state and local inclusion say Homeland Security officials mainly want to control the flow of information and are reluctant to give up that power.

Fear of confusion

Two senior Homeland Security officials, discussing their concerns on condition they not be named because the issue is still unresolved, said that adding local officials would create "unnecessary confusion" at a unit whose main role is merely to package information.

And Homeland Security has sought ways to incorporate state and local officials by assigning them to offices inside the department, such as its intelligence office and its operations center, Knocke said.

Kerry Sleeper, Vermont's homeland security adviser and the point man for state homeland officials in talks over the creation of the new unit, said it was "absolutely insulting" that the issue hasn't been resolved, more than five years after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, who chairs the House Homeland Security committee, called the impasse "very disappointing news" in a letter last week to Homeland intelligence chief Charles Allen.

If the White House fails to break the impasse, said the senior intelligence official, Congress might step in to force Homeland Security to include state and local participation in the unit.