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## Critics Fear Database for Tracking Homeless Goes Too Far

By The Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. – Critics fear a statewide database that will track the homeless as they get help will put victims of domestic violence in danger, make fraud easier and discourage people from getting help.

Starting next year, information on computers used at shelters, soup kitchens and treatment centers can be shared with nonprofit agencies across North Carolina.

Supporters say the goal is to improve services, allowing workers to track whether the homeless get continued help.

But critics charge the database will subject the homeless “to a level of tracking that is normally used against criminals,” said Jennifer Rudinger, executive director of the ACLU of North Carolina.

The Carolina Homeless Information Network is designed to reduce paperwork, coordinate resources and provide an accurate count of the state’s homeless. It is one of a dozen databases under way in different states because of a new federal regulation requiring agencies that serve the homeless to keep more precise numbers.

Rick McNeil, a homeless man in Raleigh, already worries about the database.

Every night, McNeil decides between trying for a bed at the Raleigh men’s shelter and sleeping in his Honda Accord. For the past several months, he has chosen his car.

McNeil, 32, who is gay and has a history of depression, doesn’t want personal information he tells a social worker kept on the shelter’s computers, where other employees might see it.

“I’m a lot more at peace in my car,” he said. “I don’t need to feel like I’m going back to prison.”

Officials with the N.C. Housing Coalition, a nonprofit group that is developing the database with state money, said it will have multiple safeguards to keep information private and restrict access.

A similar database on the homeless has been maintained in Wake County since October. Others are running in Charlotte and Greensboro and planned in Durham and Fayetteville.

Eventually, they will be tied into the state network, which will also provide direct access for rural communities that do not have their own system.

While the databases are required by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, that department will not have access to all the data.

The programs use names, Social Security numbers, dates of birth and other personal data to set up individual computer files. Whenever a homeless person spends a night in a shelter, sees a counselor or picks up food at a participating agency, the file is updated.

The goal is to give social workers a comprehensive record of what services a client gets. It allows them to make electronic referrals to other agencies and follow up to see whether the person got help.

“If we give someone a referral for food or rent assistance, now we can see: Has he stopped in? Was there a problem?” said David Stratton, information technology manager for Wake County Human Services.

But critics worry that the information will be misused, and lead to discrimination or identity theft, or inadvertently revealing the location of a woman fleeing an abusive relationship.

“It is the perfect stalker’s tool,” said Cindy Southworth, a spokeswoman for the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “We are putting people who are running for their lives into a central database and sharing it across the state.”

Chris Estes, executive director of the N.C. Housing Coalition, said records from domestic-violence shelters will be coded so that clients’ names and other key personal details won’t be available to all users.

“Those will have a much higher level of privacy,” he said.

Rudinger of the ACLU said the statewide database goes far beyond what is necessary to count the homeless and improve services. She said it is unnecessary to track individuals’ income, benefits, education, health problems and personal issues.

“This would apply to anybody who uses services for the homeless for any length of time, including hurricane victims who are just seeking temporary shelter,” she said.

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