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Domestic Violence Shelters Oppose Data-Sharing Plan

By Timothy Pratt <timothy@lasvegassun.com>

A federal data-gathering plan calling for computers at nonprofit organizations to be linked is being opposed by leaders of domestic violence shelters, who say abusers could use the information to track down and harm or kill their clients.

The system was supposed to be online Oct. 1, but uproar surrounding the shelter's opposition has left the effort at an impasse, said Shawna Parker Brody, analyst at Clark County Community Resources Management and technical adviser to the project.

Domestic violence shelters nationally want the federal government to exempt them from the plan, which ties federal funding to the computers being linked, because "one breach of a victim's information could be lethal," said Cindy Southworth, director of technology for the National Network to End Domestic Violence, a Washington-based group.

The situation is a new wrinkle in the ongoing controversy nationwide pitting information technology and the benefits it can provide against potential invasions of personal privacy, experts said.

"This is a growing problem," said John Harrison, assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas school of computer science. "As people are employing more technology to collect and analyze information, as well as link individuals to organizations, there are risks of ... breaches of security and privacy."

The idea behind the plan is to use data gathered and shared among about 40 nonprofit organizations locally – and hundreds more nationwide – to better manage public funds, Parker Brody said.

"Local and federal governments and policymakers need this information to know what services different populations need and whether they work," she said.

But Charleen Ayt-Stann, immediate past coordinator of law enforcement services at Safe Nest, one of two area domestic violent shelters, said "technology versus human life ... and what's more important (of the two) is kind of how we see it."

The computer network is a new requirement of the Housing and Urban Development Department tied to annual community-wide applications for grants funding shelters and other services to help the homeless.

“At this point exemption (from the computer network) is not on the table,” said Matt White, HUD technical assistance provider for the Las Vegas area.

“HUD has spend considerable time investigating ways to insure the security and safety of domestic violence shelter clients,” he said. “Domestic violence shelter participation is vital to build a larger picture of the extent and scope of homelessness on a regional basis.”

Locally, the region applied for \$6 million in HUD funds this year; results will be released in December, Parker Brody said.

Running the network would cost \$208,000 each of the next two years, more than half of which would be funded by the county, according to the Web site of the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth, the nonprofit organization coordinating the effort.

If 50 percent of the nonprofit organizations receiving HUD money for the homeless are not part of the network by June 2005, the following year’s funding could be jeopardized, Parker Brody said.

She said that many local organizations are currently hesitant to sign on to the project because their clients may also be domestic violence shelter clients. Safe Nest and a shelter called Safe House together offer about 160 beds to victims of domestic violence.

“Nobody wants to hurt ... client confidentiality,” Parker Brody said.

Aydt-Stann said she hopes the federal government caves in to pressure from the shelters – about 700 nationwide, Southworth said – who want to be exempted from joining the network.

Safe Nest got \$110,000 this year from HUD, out of a total budget of about \$3.5 million, Aydt-Stann said.

If the lobbying effort is unsuccessful, she said that Safe Nest will “decide if (the) funding is something we’d rather not depend on.”

But Parker Brody said the software local organizations are set to use is “safer than (information from) election departments or utility companies” – two sources of information she said abusers use to locate their victims.

Harrison, of UNLV, said “it is very hard and requires lots of work and lots of thought to create systems that can’t be compromised – and it can be costly.”

For the shelters, however, the issue is not only technological, but legal, since the regulations tied to the plan allow police, court officials and others access to information gathered, Southworth said.

Domestic violence shelters currently are not required by law to share personal information about their clients, she said.

“Even in the best-case scenario, the systems used would only be protected from external hackers – but not from Freedom of Information Act requests, court orders or law enforcement access,” Southworth said.

“We have batterers that will do anything to get at their victims.”

Southworth said she didn’t doubt the intentions behind the project, or the need to gather information, but said that annual surveys or some other method could be just as useful.

“This issue,” she said, “is part of the broader question facing us as a society about how we access the benefits of technology while making sure the privacy and security of our information is maintained.”

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