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Scrambled, Encoded and Encrypted

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development says its shared goal with domestic violence shelters is to gather critical information while protecting the privacy of those who would otherwise have only the streets to call their home.

In its willingness to protect privacy, HUD offers that information databases, tracking individual users of homeless services, can be encrypted, and will therefore be secure.

But domestic violence advocates say that's not good enough.

"They can scramble it, they can encode it, they can decode, but it all comes down to it's a human tracking system containing sensitive victim information," says Cindy Southworth, director of technology at the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

For some states the tracking system is created by a Continuum of Care – a HUD term for a shelter coalition. For the state of Georgia, which has 400 agencies participating, it could mean chaos.

"It depends state to state how they will roll out HMIS," says Southworth. "If he can find out she's now in a small tiny town in rural Mass., that could be deadly. We believe that any of these databases can be blown wide open by the Freedom of Information Act. Batterers know how to open these up."

Even though HUD agreed last week to leave victims' names out of the mix, the database still always links to her, says Southworth. HUD is linking a victim's information across the state and the city, she says, by using a combination of name, Social Security number and date of birth to encode her information. HUD has to keep it somewhat simple, she says, because they themselves need to be able to de-code it.

Another concern is that HUD has not made accommodations to protect victims of domestic violence who use community services, such as food pantries, soup kitchens and transitional home programs and housing vouchers.

When someone is no longer considered in danger, they may go to a homeless shelter and their information then becomes more widely distributed.

“When our system is full,” says HAWC Executive Director Candace Waldron. “We refer to some other shelters in the area and they won’t have the same interests to encrypt the data and it’s not a confidential shelter.”

How secure can these databases be, asks Waldron, when she knows of three HMIS systems just in her community.

“How many other systems are there going to be nationally and how good are they going to be? They are going to be all over the map. That’s why we’re going to be hyper vigilant about protecting our confidential information.”

It won’t be helpful if one state protects, while one does not, she says.

“What’s a foolproof, encrypted system? Some guidance on that would be helpful, I would think.”

Without much guidance, John La Bella of Housing Works, a Cambridge-based software company, has created an HMIS system used by local municipalities, such as Newton, Lawrence, and Lynn. Though it might not be what HUD expects, they can’t complain, says La Bella, because it’s the only one that actually works.

Waldron agrees that the system is a success because it is mindful of privacy. If she participates in HMIS, this one, which works with her consortium, Lynn Pact, might be the most workable answer.

La Bella’s system does not send a victim’s name or Social Security number over the Internet, so there’s nothing to hack. Instead, it issues a unique ID number to each case, which is transmitted into space instead of more traceable data.

La Bella jumped at the chance to take up this programming challenge that mixes social services with technology. He helped create one of the first Web sites ever in existence, number 70, in fact, which was an informational site for those with AIDS and HIV. La Bella says he most enjoyed watching pharmaceutical companies and public policy change when the Internet got into the hands of people who didn’t always have access to it.

La Bella later used the Web to help find housing for these patients. Salem’s HAWC then started using his computer system to locate housing for victims of domestic violence.

Regardless of the advancements being made, the issue has been extremely complex, says Southworth, who leads the only national project that addresses all forms of technology and domestic violence – in other words, high-tech stalking.

Though she believes the people who designed this plan are passionate about homelessness and are trying to embark on a sophisticated study, it will be implemented by case workers at shelters who shouldn't be working with a project this sophisticated and this dangerous, who often are volunteers, says Southworth, and who are busy doing "real work."

"I speak geek well and I find this to be highly nuanced," she says.

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