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Michigan homeland security center expands; foes urge oversight

BY CHRISTINE FERRETTI / THE DETROIT NEWS

Detroit — The state's little-known homeland security center is expanding into southeastern Michigan, but the plans have civil libertarians and at least one local official urging more oversight.

The Michigan Intelligence Operations Center opened in Lansing five years ago in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. In the past year, Gov. Rick Snyder has OK'd plans to add a Detroit node to disseminate information on suspicious behaviors and crime trends among local, state and federal authorities.

State police say the second "fusion center" will aid authorities in assessing potential threats, but others fear privacy invasions.

Oakland County's Public Services Committee is to take up a request today from the county's Homeland Security Division to assign a Sheriff's representative to the Detroit and Southeastern Michigan Information and Intelligence Center. Officials in seven counties and Detroit are being offered federal aid to divert law enforcement officers to the center.

Commissioners earlier delayed action on the grant award, after GOP Commissioner Jim Runstead and several civil rights advocates questioned oversight of the operation by a 10-member volunteer advisory board.

Runstead said he grew concerned after reading a Detroit News article from February 2010 that revealed the panel hadn't convened for a meeting or had all of its members appointed.

The Public Services Committee chairman said he'll ask commissioners to support creating a three-member civilian oversight panel, which would work with the Sheriff's Office and report to commissioners on compliance with privacy policies. Runstead said he might vote against the grant if his resolution is rejected.

"My main concern is not about having the fusion center and data sharing. My main concern is that they have oversight," he said. "This at least gives citizens of Oakland County some confidence that there's another set of eyes looking at things."

Runstead added he will urge Snyder to establish a separate 10-member advisory board for the center's Detroit node. "The governor created this first one, I'm sure he could create a second one," he said. "It's a very big job."

Sara Wurfel, a spokeswoman for Snyder, did not comment specifically on Runstead's request, but said: "Our overarching goal is to avoid confusion, ensure coordination and that the same standards and procedures are in place, all with proper oversight."

County Commissioner Bill Dwyer, R-Farmington Hills, a former police chief, won't support Runstead's idea. "We don't have the authority at the county level to put a civilian on the Fusion Center oversight board," he said. "It isn't necessary."

The Michigan State Police oversees the MIOC, which was created in 2007 under an executive order by then-Gov. Jennifer Granholm. It also calls for a governor-appointed advisory board made up of residents, military, state and local police, attorneys and civil rights advocates.

The center is one of about 70 nationwide that review tips and share information. The MIOC is state and federally funded. It received \$8.5 million in federal homeland security funding from fiscal years 2006-10, state police said.

David Dudenhoefer of Detroit, a former state coordinator for Campaign for Liberty, a libertarian nonprofit, says the centers are a federal overreach.

According to media reports, fusion centers have detained individuals over cell phones, suspicious looks and their support of presidential candidate Ron Paul.

"If these people really wanted to stop crime, they've got the technology. Why form another bureaucracy to achieve this goal? This is another monster they are creating, and what it evolves into 10 to 20 years down the road? That's anybody's guess," Dudenhoefer said.

Michigan State Police Inspector Gene Kapp, director of the MIOC and acting head of its advisory board, said both the Detroit and Lansing centers run under state and federal guidelines.

"We're in compliance. We always have been and still are," Kapp said.

Nicole Lisabeth, spokeswoman for the State Police emergency management and homeland security division, said the advisory board first met in March 2010.

Shelli Weisberg, ACLU legislative director, is on the advisory board, tasked with crafting MIOC privacy and accountability policies. She said the ACLU has concerns about the data shared in fusion centers, but said the MIOC is doing it right. "If each fusion center has an oversight board, like MIOC does, that's the best we can do," she said.

The board meets quarterly; members serve staggered, four-year terms. It next meets Feb. 16.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said Runstead's recommendation won't be as effective as having a staffer on the inside. "This will give us a chance to interact with the center on a daily basis at no cost to Oakland County taxpayers," he said.

cferretti@detnews.com

(313) 222-2069