Logan troopers to get roving database access

Critics see threat to privacy rights in antiterrorism move

By Keith Reed, Globe Staff, 6/22/2004

State troopers at Logan International Airport will have instant access to a wealth of personal information on nearly every person who passes through the airport, from Social Security numbers to names of former roommates.

All that information will be at the fingertips of troopers at Logan, under a deal between the Massachusetts State Police and LocatePlus Holdings Corp., a Beverly company that collects public records about individuals and rents access to the information to law enforcement agencies.

Officers in Troop F, the State Police unit at Logan, are getting wireless BlackBerry devices linked to LocatePlus's database that includes 7 billion records containing information on 98 percent of the adults in the United States. That could include anything from unlisted phone numbers to names on a lease.

When a trooper stops a person acting suspiciously at the airport, he could enter that person's name into the device, which would search for information about his or her identity, past associations, and activities.

State Police and LocatePlus officials said yesterday that giving police access to personal information on people they stop at the airport could prove critical in identifying potential terrorist suspects or thwarting other crimes. For example, since the database lists previous addresses and names on a lease, such information can help an officer determine whether someone lived or otherwise associated with alleged terrorists.

"A name, that's all he needs," said LocatePlus chief executive Jon Latorella. "He can find out who you lived with, where you lived, anything about you. We have every unlisted phone number in the country. Our stuff is instant, instead of having to wait until after the fact of a bombing."

It's that instant access to personal information that peeves privacy advocates, who argue the program will infringe upon rights and could lead to abuses or even false identification of people as criminals or terrorists.

"This involves mass scrutiny of the lives and activities of innocent people, a serious invasion of privacy and a violation of the core democratic principle that the government should not be permitted to violate a person's privacy, unless it has a reason to believe that he or she is involved in wrongdoing," said Carol Rose, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts.

Rose said that police should set limits on how the information will be used and conduct audits of its uses.
"Technology by itself does not make us any safer," she added.
State Police said yesterday that whether to use the devices for background checks on individuals would be at the discretion of each trooper. Still, the police said, there will be little room for abuse of the system because all of the information contained in the database is culled from public records that police and even ordinary citizens could search on their own.

"It's nothing we don't have access to already," said Lieutenant Thomas Coffey.

"Instead of me having to go down to the registry of deeds in a particular county, I can now access this information via a BlackBerry," he added. "It's very critical because timely information is important to us, in order to provide a safer environment."

LocatePlus said the company will monitor every time the system is used and can lock individual BlackBerry devices out of its database if it suspects abuses.

State Police at Logan have been testing the BlackBerry devices with LocatePlus data since last year. Many troopers, including those at the airport, already carry hand-held computers that are tied into various law enforcement databases. Those databases allow an officer to check, for example, whether there are outstanding warrants for a person or he is on the US Justice Department's terrorism watch list.

But information that could tie individuals to crimes or to terrorists -- such as whether a former roommate is a suspected terrorist -- might be missing from law enforcement databases.

For example, if a trooper finds an abandoned cellphone, he could search immediately in LocatePlus's database for information on the individuals whose telephone numbers are stored in the phone. Gathering such information under normal circumstances would take several steps and more time.

Each of the 147 troopers assigned to Troop F will get a BlackBerry with LocatePlus access, said Phil Orlandella, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Port Authority, which owns and operates Logan.

Latorella said the State Police will pay $99 per unit per month for the computers and database access under a 12-month contract.

LocatePlus has 70 employees and pulled in $3.4 million in revenue last year, Latorella said. The company, founded in 1993, expects to make its first profit on projected sales of $6.5 million this year.

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