



Norm Beasley, right, designed the Arizona Counter Terrorism Information Center with his friend Ray Churay. It is considered one of the most effective of all the "fusion centers" created after the 9/11 attacks. (By David Wallace For The Washington Post)

A Model for Cooperation

In Arizona, Officials Share Data the Old-Fashioned Way

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On a recent drug bust in Phoenix, law enforcement officials found a vial of white powder that made them suspicious. They called Arizona's joint federal, state and local counterterrorism center, which dispatched a team to investigate.

The powder turned out to be triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a highly sensitive explosive similar to the substance that failed "shoe bomber" Richard Reid was found to be carrying on a transatlantic flight in December 2001.

Word of the discovery reached the FBI in Washington within 10 minutes. Although arrests and interrogations later determined there was no terrorist connection, it was just the kind of rapid information-sharing envisioned by intelligence changes implemented after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks caught the intelligence community by surprise.

But the news did not travel through any of the sophisticated new high-speed communications systems built to facilitate rapid information flow between Washington and domestic counterterrorism's front lines. Instead, it went the old-fashioned way, with an Arizona police official walking across the hall to tell his friend in the local FBI counterterrorist task force, who then picked up the telephone and called headquarters.

The Arizona Counter Terrorism Information Center (ACTIC) is considered one of the best-run and most effective of what are now 42 state "fusion centers" spread across the country since the al-Qaeda attacks. Built with a Department of Homeland Security grant and state funding, the suburban Phoenix center houses representatives from state and local police and fire departments, a DHS contingent and the local FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), which moved its operations away from the bureau's downtown field office.

Norm Beasley, then an Arizona state police officer, designed the operation on a restaurant napkin at breakfast one morning in 2002 with his longtime colleague Ray Churay, then head of the JTTF.

"After some of the smoke cleared from 9/11," Churay said in a recent interview, "it was really obvious to some of us in law enforcement that we were not going to be successful against terrorism, at least this form of it, unless everybody worked together." They and other Arizona officials overcame initial resistance in Washington to the concept and the expenditure.

The center works, they agreed, as much in spite of federal efforts as because of them. "We here don't depend on somebody from Washington sending us an e-mail or a classified document," Beasley said. "I can just walk 50 feet . . . and get whatever information I want."

Rather than trying to find his way through the tangle of overlapping federal counterterrorism agencies, Beasley said, he uses the same across-the-hall system when he has something to tell Washington. He knows the federal government is trying, he said, but "if I had a criticism from the state and local perspective, what I personally would like to see is a system where there was a one-stop shop in Washington."

Federal law gives DHS the responsibility for managing the two-way information flow, but for Beasley and many other state officials nationwide, figuring out how to exchange information with Washington often takes more time and trouble than it is worth.

According to a June report by the DHS inspector general, 2 percent of 9,500 registered users of the Homeland Security Information Network -- the department's two-way

computer portal -- logged on to the system each day. Although 360 state officials were cleared to use HSIN's separate secret portal, users averaged 27 a month.

The problem is one of many similar issues now being addressed in Washington by Thomas McNamara, a former Foreign Service officer newly appointed to head the federal multi-agency Information Sharing Council. McNamara has prepared a blueprint for two-way networking he hopes will help end the confusion that has arisen over piecemeal and often contradictory national security information distributed over a welter of federal systems.

For Beasley, who has retired from the state police and has been asked by Washington to help teach other state centers how to operate efficiently, success in Arizona began with his relationship with Churay. "When you talk about Washington and all those systems they're developing that are going to interconnect everybody in the country and everybody in the world, that's good," he said.

"But the reality is, on a day-to-day basis you have to go into those systems," he added. "Most people, if they're operational, don't have the time. That's where that personal relationship, day to day, is absolutely critical. This business is built on trust."

-- **Karen DeYoung**

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