

FBI eyes locally developed program for nationwide distribution

By Jon Gillooly – Staff writer – Marietta Daily Journal - Monday, June 14, 2004 7:29 AM EDT

MARIETTA - A Georgia State University professor and City of Marietta employee have worked together to develop a crime data software program now being eyed by the FBI for possible nationwide distribution.

Called the Improving Crime Data project, the program allows police officers to use a search engine - similar to Google on the Internet - to sift through police records and communicate with agencies outside their jurisdictions.

The Marietta Police Department's project is one program of police agencies nationwide the bureau has taken an interest in.

"What caught (the FBI's) attention was a piece of software that we wrote for police whereby you can perform a Google-like search on crime incident data in our mainframe," said Gene Estensen, the city's director of Management Information Systems. "Our work here has come to the attention of the FBI, in a positive way, and they have had staff here several times to review our software."

Police have an endless number of crime incident records stored on their car-based laptop computers, and the Improving Crime Data software allows them to wade through it all.

For example, if a robbery suspect was spotted in a white Acura, typing in "white Acura" will bring up any reports involving the vehicle on the search engine.

Although Google-like search engines are not a new phenomenon, they may now be used to help communication among law enforcement agencies, a need that has become more apparent since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The reasons for the lack of communication between law enforcement agencies involve the structure of the system itself and the refusal of many Americans to allow police more power, said Dr. Robert Friedmann, professor of criminal justice at Georgia State University.

Friedmann works closely on this project with Marietta Police Chief Bobby Moody and Estensen.

Friedmann said the structure of police departments puts more emphasis on reporting to the government in charge of that agency rather than sharing information with other police agencies.

Combine that with the fact that many citizens are afraid of a police state, and police data is severely underutilized, Friedmann said.

Estensen cited 9/11 as a prime example of what happens when agencies fail to communicate, pointing to all the information police had on file about the terrorists before the attacks.

With this in mind, the FBI has proposed the National Data Exchange program, which will promote state sharing at all levels of government.

To accomplish this, the FBI established six focus groups one of which - the Connectivity/Data Sets Focus Group - is chaired by Estensen.

He meets with the committee, whose members represent the CIA, FBI and NSA, in Washington about once a month.

"There's quite a phenomenon happening here. Others are watching," Estensen said.

"Marietta citizens ought to be very proud of the achievements of the police department and city," Friedmann said.

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