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Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) Help All Aspects of Law Enforcement

By [Libby Stengel](#) • on March 25, 2011

“That doesn’t look right.” The phrase is said or thought by law enforcement officers frequently. Every officer can relate to situations that leave you wondering what you just saw. Besides the obscure and ridiculous incident, there are all types of scenarios that don’t quite fit in the category of a standard Incident Report or an Intelligence Report.

Generally, officers capture this information in an Incident Report or Field Interview Report under the category of “Suspicious Activity” or “Suspicious Person.” That works to capture this information for others’ use within the agency. However, in the spirit of information sharing across the LE community, using the newly defined process for Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) is the best fit.

The Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI) was created to capture suspicious activity on a local or state basis but avails the data for national sharing. SAR data does not contain reasonable suspicion of criminal activity or criminal predicate but is still more remarkable than regular Dispatch, Field Interview or Incident Reports. In fact, the data point could have a terrorism link that you may not be aware of. The officer or citizen that creates a SAR based on their expertise and experience about a situation that they witnessed but they cannot assign a specific criminal activity to it. Something just doesn’t sit right about what they are seeing.

While on lunch break for the last week Officer Jones has seen a black van sitting outside the Smithville Federal Building. Every day at 12:15 the van pulls into a 15 minute parking zone in front of the building and the two gentlemen sitting in the van observe the building and appear to be writing. No loading or unloading occurs during the 10 minutes that the van is parked. Officer Jones takes note of the license plate and van details.

In this scenario, no crime has occurred. However, it is odd to Officer Jones that a van will sit outside a federal building and conduct no business inside the building. Does he have reasonable suspicion of criminal activity? No. Is there any reason that this information should be included in an Incident Report? No.

This is an example of behavioral information that should be put into a SAR and, after appropriate vetting, become available nationally in the shared space. While the information is of little use to Officer Jones at this time, that van description or license plate might be of large significance to another law enforcement agency or even a terrorism investigation. Criminal activity, including terrorist planning, is not localized to one jurisdiction or agency. Therefore, submitting local law enforcement’s SARs to be shared through the SAR shared space makes sense for local, regional and federal law enforcement officials. When you see something that doesn’t look quite right, don’t keep it to yourself, say something. The SAR you file might just be the final piece to a puzzle that saves lives. For more information about SARs and how to participate, visit <http://nsi.ncirc.gov>.

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