

The Fusion Center Mandate

Intelligence

Author:

Stephen G Serrao

Date

December 2009

The Fusion Center Mandate

By Stephen G. Serrao, Captain, New Jersey State Police (ret.)

Having reached the mid-point of 2009, law enforcement professionals would do well to pause and reflect on the state of fusion centers, whose numbers have grown to around 70 in the U.S. Their core mandate is to “fuse a broader range of data, including non-traditional source data, to create a more comprehensive threat picture.” That is according to a report by the Congressional Research Service entitled, “Fusion Centers: Issues and Options for Congress.”

While fusion centers have been around for awhile and are integral to the sharing of intelligence in the country’s counter-terrorism initiative, some are still experiencing growing pains and the fulfillment of their mandate.

Fusion Center Challenges

More often than not, fusion center commanders have extensive experience in counter-espionage or they have career experiences confronting street gangs and narcotics trafficking organizations, but they have limited exposure to the concept of strategic intelligence and the intelligence life cycle. Some of these commanders lived in the classified world, chasing Russian and Chinese spies in the post Cold-War era. Other commanders battled vice and other crimes committed by organized criminal groups. Largely, their focus was operational. The objectives of these gang and narcotics units were to make cases against bad guys and to lock them up. They were generally not involved in the strategic intelligence process, or at least they didn’t know they were.

Additionally, many fusion center directors have been culled from the ranks of federal agents or retiring law enforcement officers with limited exposure to counter-terrorism. That’s due to the fact that most law enforcement agencies had very few resources dedicated to this function prior to 9/11.

So it stands to reason that fusion center organizers had only a small pool of director candidates from which to initially draw – candidates with specific experiences in counter-terrorism operations, intelligence and analysis.

The lack of experience in the intelligence cycle and intelligence processes – and what it takes to implement these – means that the building of fusion centers, the hiring of staff, and the development of mission statements have been very tactical and reactive in nature.

In many cases, staff members are assigned to case-related activities and/or the “crises of the moment.”

In reality, a fusion center whose business process is true to its mandate must be much more strategic. Staff members in fusion centers are responsible for the direct or indirect collection and collation of volumes and volumes of intelligence data for the purpose of creating long-term strategic threat assessments.

In order to gain access to the best information available, building relationships with state and local law enforcement agencies is key to this strategic initiative. It is paramount to have an understanding of the protocols and procedures in the civilian law enforcement environment at the non-federal level. Often, the necessary relationship-building is not taking place because commanders and directors were not accustomed to building those relationships in their previous roles in the federal space.

Another growth pain is the procurement of technology. Fusion center commanders have confronted the obstacle of funding from the creation of the very first fusion center. Much of the Department of Homeland Security's initial funding was allocated toward building infrastructure and buying equipment, not hiring trained, experienced staff members. This trend has resulted in technology being purchased without the input and crucial feedback of the subject matter experts using the tools.

In some cases, IT and electronics experts were delegated with the responsibility of advising directors on law enforcement technology purchases, especially software, without the counsel and inputs of experienced police officers, analysts and investigators.

For example, visual graphics analytical tools are great to have at your disposal to identify areas not apparent in an investigation. However, without data repositories to map against these tools, their usefulness is compromised.

The lesson learned is that the purchasers of technology must solicit input from end-users, including investigators and analysts, to ensure a sound decision-making process. By doing so, the staff members performing the various functions in a fusion center will get the tools they need to succeed in their areas of responsibility. Potential disconnects and pitfalls are then avoided.

Fusion Center Successes

Despite these challenges, there are many excellent examples of fusion centers with strategic mindsets. One such example is at a fusion center on the East Coast that I have visited on numerous occasions. Here the commander has an intelligence background and oversees trained civilian analysts who crunch data and develop daily threat assessments on issues, threats, and crimes impacting the state and its citizens.

These assessments delineate extremist and terrorist groups with a presence in the state, their activities, the impact on law enforcement, recommendations for the allocation of police resources, and strategies for interdicting criminal activities. The success of this fusion center stems from the experience of its leadership, the productivity of its staff, the strategic approach to threat assessment, and always keeping the big picture in mind.

Meanwhile, another fusion center that I have visited is making the most of its technology by using its large-screen TVs for live data feeds containing information on air transportation industry activity across the U.S., as well as on the movement of cargo via the national railroad infrastructure, including those transporting hazardous materials.

Tools for Success

Fusion centers are tasked with not only discovering the needle in the haystack, but also connecting the needles in that same haystack. That's why good fusion centers, such as those referenced above, build a strong foundation in intelligence analysis and intelligence management. Their business mindsets are intelligence-driven, incorporating classic intelligence features and functionality – through the entire intelligence lifecycle – from collection to dissemination.

All this is imperative so that analysts can use that intelligence information to paint an accurate picture of a given threat. Above all, the systems deployed must be compliant with 28CFR23 (Part 28 Section 23 of the Code of Federal Regulations), the Department of Justice's federal regulations governing criminal intelligence systems. This key aspect, as well as concern for protecting citizens' privacy rights, is sometimes given less consideration than necessary by software vendors and those directors who are "tactical operation" focused.

Within a proper intelligence platform, data integration capabilities and access to public source data also should be made available. Classic intelligence can be managed alongside other data to widen the pool of information and improve the decision-making process.

Fusion center staff members should have no trouble finding and examining non-intelligence data repositories – whether they be open source, police reporting systems or other agency databases – through a single-view, single-portal type arrangement.

The rule of thumb is that everyone in a fusion center – be it analyst, investigator, commander or data entry clerk – should be able to use some subset of the tools offered in a comprehensive intelligence management system. By doing so, they can effectively connect people and information, and integrate, analyze and map data for the strategic threat assessments imperative to both national and local security, and the fulfillment of the fusion center mission.

Captain Stephen G. Serrao is a former New Jersey State Police Counterterrorism Bureau Chief, and now helps shape the direction of intelligence management software as Director of Product Management, Americas Region for Memex, Inc., a worldwide provider of intelligence management, data integration, search and analysis solutions (www.memex.com). Serrao can be reached at steve.serrao@memex.com.

Contact Us

Memex Technologies Ltd and Memex, Inc

UK and International

Memex Technology Ltd
2 Redwood Court
Peel Park
East Kilbride G74 5PF
Scotland
Telephone: +44 (0)1355 233804
Fax: +44 (0)1355 239676

America

Memex, Inc.
22636 Davis Drive, Suite 130
Sterling, VA 20164, USA
Telephone: +1 703 556 4031
Toll Free: +1 866 MEMEXUS
Fax: +1 703 556 4282

Copyright ©

No part of the contents of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of Memex.

More Information

For the latest information about our product and services, please visit

<http://www.memex.com>