Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative (NSI)

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The 72 state and local fusion centers designated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), along with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and selected DHS components, have collaborated to develop the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI) program. The NSI incorporates agencies' individual SAR processes (the gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing of suspicious information on observed behavior reasonably indicative of pre-operational planning related to terrorism or other criminal activity) into a nationwide capability to share terrorism-related SAR data across all levels of government.

The NSI provides fusion centers with the ability to receive and vet SARs within their state or region, and rapidly notify the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) of potential incidents with the push of a button. Essentially the NSI provides the law enforcement community with another tool to "connect the dots" to combat crime and terrorism in a manner that rigorously protects the privacy and civil liberties of Americans. The IJIS Institute has played a key role in the analysis, design, and deployment of technology solutions to support broad information sharing functional objectives and NSI technical requirements.

Executive Summary

Challenge

The lack of a technical information sharing architecture and data exchange standards inhibit the effective and timely sharing of information that may be indicative of planned terrorist actions or related criminal activities.

Solution

The establishment of the SAR Information Exchange Package Documentation (IEPD) and the deployment of distributed repository, search, and retrieval IT resources to permit the application of operational and technical best practices to support a national rollout of the NSI.

Results

An NSI Evaluation Environment (NSI-EE) was successfully implemented at 14 federal, state, and major city fusion center sites over a 12-month period and proved that the combination of standardized best practices, functional training, and technology can significantly improve the quality and timeliness of public safety and security information sharing programs. In December 2009, based upon the results of the NSI-EE, the White House directed DOJ to establish a NSI Program Management Office to implement NSI operational and technology capabilities at all fusion centers in the nation.

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Background

On October 31, 2007, President Bush issued the first National Strategy for Information Sharing to prioritize and unify our nation's efforts to advance the sharing of terrorism-related information among federal, state, local, and tribal governments, the private sector, and foreign partners. The Strategy calls for the federal government to support the development of a nationwide capability to gather, document, track, analyze, and share such information generated at the local, regional, state, or federal levels. In support of the Strategy, the Office of the Program Manager – Information Sharing Environment (PM-ISE), under guidance from the Director of National Intelligence, joined with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to define a technical and business framework for a national SAR information sharing framework.

BJA requested the assistance of the IJIS Institute in the initial planning and development of a SAR IEPD and ISE-SAR Functional Standard. To evaluate the Functional Standard and IEPD in an operational test, IJIS Institute was awarded new grants to provide the technical management of what became a 14-site deployment of hardware and software systems around the country. Those fusion center sites collectively were identified as the Nationwide SAR Initiative Evaluation Environment or NSI-EE.

Challenge

A national strategy to improve SAR information sharing required that several areas be explored including business processes, privacy and civil liberties protection, training, data exchange standards, and, of course, technology. An added constraint impacting technology alternatives was the requirement mandated by the Office of the Program Manager, Information Sharing Environment (PM-ISE) that SAR data remain under the control of the original source agency and not be held in a national repository. This constraint, mandated by the federal Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Protection Act of 2004, resulted in the need for a federated or distributed search mechanism that could access locally-hosted SARs at law enforcement agencies. Early analysis of legacy SAR database revealed a significant disparity between existing data and formats and the requirements and data element definitions provided in the ISE-SAR Functional Standard. In addition, federal, state, and local officials needed to ensure that robust privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties protections were integrated into policies, business processes and technology related to this initiative.

Solution

PM-ISE initially planned a short operational study project to provide limited technology to three state fusion centers to enable the sharing of SAR reports and evaluation of the effectiveness and completeness of the ISE SAR Functional Standard and SAR IEPD published in January 2008. Before this effort reached operational status, the study project was re-scoped as an evaluation environment and expanded to 12 fusion centers to allow for a broad major city participation in the effort. Soon after, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also joined the effort. Based on this expanded state, local and federal participation, the project was officially named the Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI).

As finally organized, the NSI-EE, included five state fusion centers, seven DHS recognized major city (Urban Area Strategic Initiative or UASI) fusion centers, DHS, and the FBI's eGuardian system that supports the JTTF structure in the nation.

The technology solution was based upon a "Shared Spaces" concept that mandated a distributed, locally-hosted set of common SAR data repositories that could be accessed from a central site. For the NSI-EE, an existing DOJ portal

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(www.NCIRC.gov) was used to support federated search technology that would allow authorized users to search one or more of the Shared Spaces. Searches could be based on suspicious activity, people, locations, and vehicles.
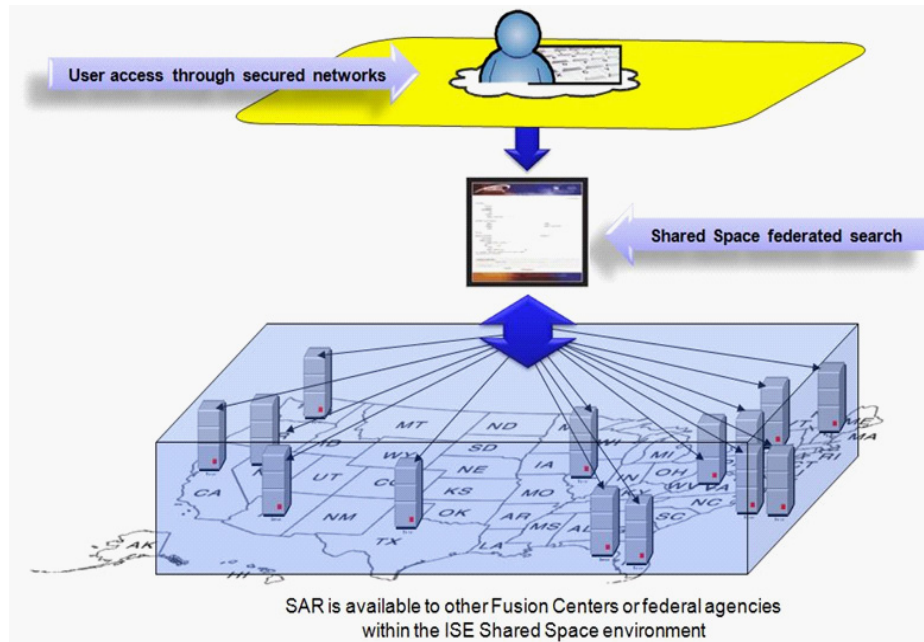
At each fusion center, a common database and web server architecture was deployed to incorporate the ISE-SAR IEPD schema and also support encrypted transmissions from the NCIRC.gov site. In addition, DOJ-sponsored Logical Entity Extraction Standard (LEXS) Search and Response (LEXS-SR) and Publish and Disseminate (LEXS-PD) message standards were used.

To address the privacy and civil liberties concerns expressed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), other advocacy groups, and the federal Privacy Committee, it was mandated that fusion centers and other agencies participating in the NSI must develop a written privacy policy as a precondition to sharing or receiving any personal information contained in the SAR reports stored in the ISE-SAR Shared Space.

To assist the fusion centers, fusion center privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties templates were developed and targeted training programs emphasizing privacy and civil liberties / civil rights (CLCR) were created.

Results

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The IJIS Institute will continue to work with the NSI-PMO to implement the NSI program under the direction of BJA to ensure that all 72 fusion centers have the appropriate technology resources to share SAR information.

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NSI Resources

Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative web site *(http://nsi.ncirc.gov/)*

IJIS Institute's Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting web page *(http://www.ijis.org/_programs/sar.html)*

The **Information Sharing Environment** web site *(http://www.ise.gov/pages/sar-initiative.aspx)* contains an extensive library of SAR documentation, some of which are provided below. For more information, visit these web sites:
- **Information Sharing Environment** *(http://www.ise.gov/pages/sar-initiative.aspx)*
- **Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI)** *(http://nsi.ncirc.gov/)*

ISE-SAR Functional Standard
- A NIEM-conformant IEPD for suspicious activity reporting. Use this document to accelerate interoperable implementation of SAR with and among fusion centers and to align implementation with national best practices.

PM-ISE Fact Sheets *(http://www.ise.gov/pages/sar-initiative.aspx)*
- **Update to Suspicious Activity Reporting Functional Standard Provides Greater Privacy and Civil Liberties Protections** *(http://www.ise.gov/docs/ctiss/ISE-SAR_Functional_Standard_V1_5_Fact_Sheet.pdf)*
- **Nationwide Suspicious Activities Reporting Initiative** *(http://www.ise.gov/docs/sar/Fact_Sheet_NSI_-_December_23_2008_Final.pdf)*
- **Initial Privacy and Civil Liberties Analysis of the Information Sharing Environment-Suspicious Activity Reporting (ISE-SAR) Functional Standard and Evaluation Environment** *(http://www.ise.gov/docs/sar/Fact_Sheet_-_SAR_Privacy_Analysis.pdf)*

NSI Concept of Operations (December 2008) *(http://www.ijis.org/docs/NSI_CONOPS_Version_1_FINAL_2008-12-11_r5.pdf)*

ISE-SAR Evaluation Environment Segment Architecture (December 2008) *(http://www.ijis.org/docs/ISE-SAR_EE_Segment_Architecture_v1(Dec_2008_Final).pdf)*

Findings and Recommendations of the Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) Support and Implementation Project (October 2008) *(http://www.ijis.org/docs/SAR_Report_October_2008.pdf)*
- The purpose of the Findings and Recommendations of the SAR Support and Implementation Project is to describe the all-crimes approach to gathering, processing, reporting, analyzing, and sharing of suspicious activity by the local police agency.

Suspicious Activity Reporting Process Implementation Checklist *(http://www.ijis.org/docs/SAR_Process_Implementation_Checklist.pdf)*
- A companion document to the Findings and Recommendations of the Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) Support and Implementation Project report.

Terrorism Information Sharing and the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Report Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress (November 2009) *(http://www.ijis.org/docs/NSI Report_R40901.pdf)*
- By Mark A. Randol, Specialist in Domestic Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism, Congressional Research Service.