

# Terrorism Recruitment in Minnesota

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A REPORT TO THE MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE

Minnesota Department of Public Safety



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effective strategies to prevent recruitment into terrorism focus on counter-radicalization efforts within potentially impacted communities. This report proposes several strategies that are emphasized in existing academic literature and incorporated into current local initiatives. These strategies include, but are not limited to:

- Fostering a broad range of stakeholders who are poised for long-term, community investment.
- Support current initiatives that promote participation and engagement within the community.
- Train community members to identify youth who may be at risk for recruitment, such as those who feel disenfranchised. Support non-profit and community organizations that have the expertise to reengage these youth.
- Encourage messaging through social media and other platforms that negate potential recruitment propaganda.
- Prioritize economic and community development in target areas to promote engagement and investment in at-risk communities.
- Require transparency and accountability for all funds distributed for these purposes to build trust between governmental entities and the community.

Comprehensive research is limited on specific strategies that will decrease terrorism recruitment. Strategies will vary based on the particular needs of the community and what existing resources are available. The proposed strategies outlined in this report provide a range of options that may succeed in Minnesota.

The Department recommends that evaluation and research be conducted by independent research entities to further evaluate and determine effective strategies to prevent terrorism recruitment in Minnesota. The Department will also engage in a Request for Proposal (RFP) grant process to distribute the \$250,000 allocated by the Legislature in 2015 to counteract terrorist recruitment. Priority will be given to proposals that would result in long-term investment in the communities at risk of terrorist recruitment and which demonstrate government/community partnerships.

## ENABLING LEGISLATION

Laws of Minnesota 2015, chapter 65, art 1, sec 11, subd 2 (c) provided that “\$250,000 the first year is for the commissioner to develop strategies and make efforts to combat the recruitment of Minnesota residents by terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Shabaab. At least half of this amount must be distributed through grants to local governments with identified populations who are at-risk for recruitment. The commissioner must collaborate with federal, state, and local agencies in developing the required strategies. The commissioner shall prepare a report that explains the strategies proposed and steps to implement the strategies. The commissioner must submit the report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the house and senate committees with jurisdiction over public safety by February 1, 2016.”

## BACKGROUND

The United States has conducted counterterrorism operations for many years, with an ongoing focus on combating violent extremism (CVE).

In August 2011, the White House released a national strategy, *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, to prevent violent extremism domestically. In 2014, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced a series of pilot projects in certain cities across the country with local U.S. Attorneys' offices leading the projects with the support of the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the National Counterterrorism Center.

In September 2015 the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel released its final report containing 32 key findings and recommendations for the federal government's ongoing counterterrorism work. The Task Force estimated that the number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq had risen from less than 1,000 to over 25,000 between 2011 and 2015. These fighters come from over 100 countries, including the United States. As of its publication, the Task Force reported that 15 of the 58 publicly identified U.S.-originating foreign fighter recruits were from Minnesota. This number is an estimated fraction of the total number of U.S. citizens and residents who desire to or have made their way overseas unknown to authorities.

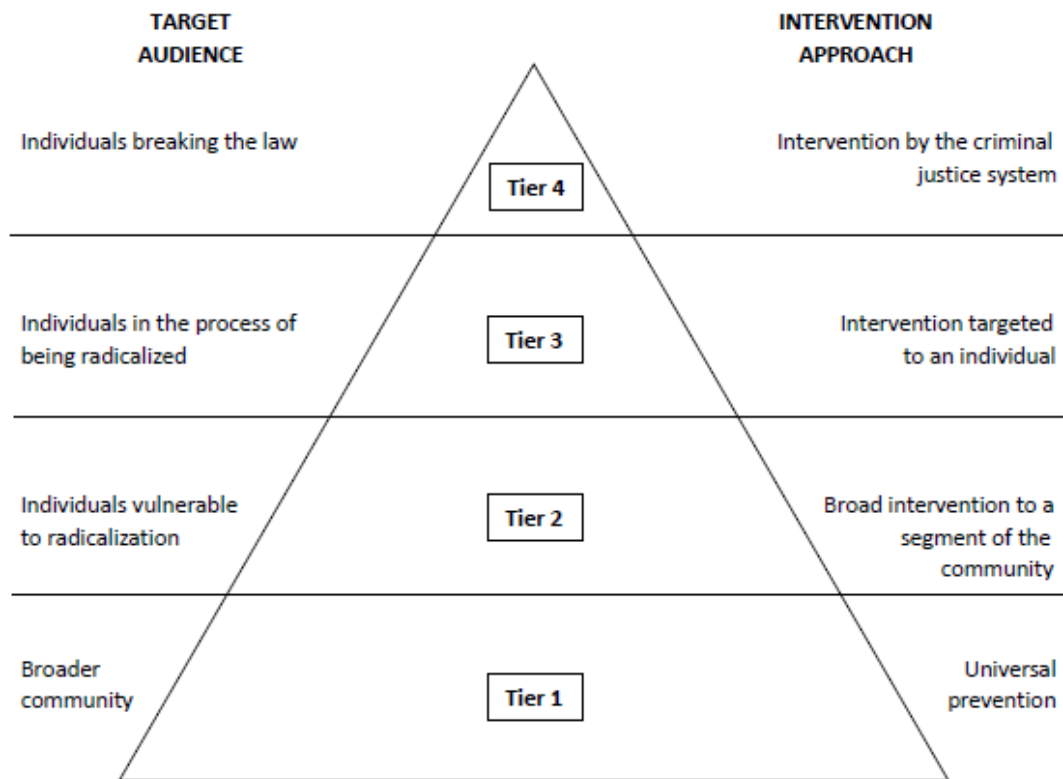
The majority of the Task Force recommendations relate to the work of the federal government or law enforcement entities; however, several recommendations focused on prevention activities that may be utilized at the local level:

- Increase counter-message efforts and empower non-governmental organizations to contest the propaganda of violent groups, commonly shared via social media, seeking to radicalize and recruit Americans overseas.
- Use testimonials of disaffected former foreign fighters, extremists and/or impacted family members to counter the narratives used to recruit Americans to travel overseas to fight with extremist groups.
- Increase engagement with local impacted communities to identify individuals who may be radicalized or contemplating traveling to fight in extremist organizations.

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH:

The research conducted by the department identified marked differences between counterterrorism efforts and counter radicalization or recruitment efforts. Counterterrorism work begins once a threat has been identified or a law has been broken, prompting law enforcement to act. In contrast, counter-radicalization work is ideally performed outside of the criminal justice system, intending to intervene before any criminal act has occurred.

According to a Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police discussion paper<sup>1</sup>, the table below illustrates a tiered approach. Tiers 1-3 show where counter-radicalization work occurs, before criminal acts have been committed and where non-police intervention is still possible. Only those individuals in Tier 4, who have committed criminal acts of terrorism or terrorist support, are the subject of counterterrorism efforts.



Research shows that any proposed strategies must include affected communities taking an active role in counter-radicalization and recruitment efforts. The most successful programs originate within the affected communities. Genuine community/government partnerships are essential to successful initiatives. In addition, establishing trust between the governmental entities and the impacted community is essential for success. The more involved and invested community members are in a program or project, the more likely it is to be effective and increases the likelihood of sustained efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Building Community Resilience to Violent Ideologies [https://www.cacp.ca/library.html?asst\\_id=92](https://www.cacp.ca/library.html?asst_id=92)

## EXPERIENCE IN MINNESOTA

The Twin Cities metro area has seen an increase in extremist recruitment during the past several years. Highly publicized cases include recruitment into al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Individuals were initially traveling to Africa to join forces with al-Qaeda or its affiliates, particularly al-Shabaab. More recently, the rate of recruitment has risen dramatically with the rise of the Islamic State. ISIL now appears to be the primary recruitment threat in the United States.

ISIL has recruited a number of Minnesotans and, like al Shabaab, its efforts are largely focused in the Twin Cities metro area. With the United States' largest Somali population, it is believed that ISIL recruiters may view the Twin Cities as prime recruitment grounds. Some believe that ISIL has a particular advantage in Minnesota because it has been able to tap into existing recruitment networks and infrastructure previously established by al Shabaab.

## FEDERAL INITIATIVES

Minneapolis is one of the three urban centers identified by the U.S. Attorney General's office in 2014 for the establishment of a pilot CVE project.<sup>2</sup> The initiatives are being led by the U.S. Attorney for each jurisdiction and are receiving resources from the federal government and private stakeholders. United States Attorney for the District of Minnesota Andrew Luger identified the following root causes of radicalization based on months of listening to the impacted community, reviewing available research, and talking with experts:

- Disaffected youth.
- A deepening disconnect between youth and religious leaders.
- Internal identity crisis.
- Community isolation.
- Lack of opportunity – including high unemployment, lack of activities for youth, and few mentors.

The Minneapolis pilot project, *Building Resilient Communities*, includes three core areas: engagement, prevention, and intervention.

- Engagement is focused on building trust and developing relationships between law enforcement and the Somali community. There is also a call for government agencies and stakeholders to increase engagement and connections within the community.
- Prevention includes increasing after-school activities and higher education scholarships, providing the Somali community with positive messaging, and expanding existing federally-funded youth programs into the Somali community of Minnesota.

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<sup>2</sup> The other two cities are Los Angeles, CA and Boston, MA.

- Intervention will be comprised of an in-school model involving community youth workers and an out-of-school model involving community volunteers.

The Department of Public Safety Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) also administers a Federal Homeland Security Grant Program. Four of the grants administered through HSEM are available to local jurisdictions and agencies.

The State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) and the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) can be used for a variety of pre-approved terrorism preparedness projects, including CVE projects. Currently, there is one grant-funded CVE project, which was awarded through the SHSP program to the City of St. Paul for a Saint Paul Police Department-led CVE program that works with East African communities. The grant total is \$100,000 and the performance period for this grant is January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2016.

#### LOCAL STAKEHOLDER APPROACHES

The Department of Public Safety also participated in formal and informal informational sessions with local and national stakeholders to learn about different approaches to preventing terrorism recruitment, especially in Minnesota. In addition to the current work of U.S. Attorney Luger, strategies currently being employed or contemplated include, but are not limited to:

- Workforce development specific to local communities experiencing recruitment.
- Public/Private partnerships to create opportunities related to education, job training, accessing employment opportunities, health and wellness.
- Culturally specific organizations conducting outreach in impacted communities, some with specific emphasis on youth intervention.

#### GUIDING STRATEGIES

Based on academic literature, international approaches, and current initiatives, the following strategies should guide a successful approach in Minnesota to counter radicalization and terrorist recruitment. These strategies prioritize collaborative stakeholder involvement aimed at supporting full participation in the community and providing opportunities to reduce disenfranchisement or hopelessness. Potentially successful initiatives will include the following principles to counter recruitment into terrorist organizations.

- Fostering a broad range of stakeholders who are poised for long-term, community investment.
  - Programs and policies that take a long-term approach and are sustainable should be given priority.
  - Culturally specific organizations conducting outreach in impacted communities, some with specific emphasis on youth intervention, should be considered.
  - Public/private partnerships may include non-traditional approaches, ranging from libraries or local non-profits to professional sports teams. In addition, businesses

in high recruitment areas could be engaged to provide support and/or financial assistance.

- It is recommended that programs develop funding streams from a wide variety of sources. Ideally, investments will help build capacity in affected communities to develop and administer their own initiatives. Communities should target those conditions conducive to radicalization that it can influence: poor self-image; lack of identity and belonging; individual expectations of life and of the community; and individual attitudes.
- Support current initiatives that promote participation and engagement within the community.
  - Train community members to recognize signs of youth who may be at risk for recruitment, such as those who feel disenfranchised. Support non-profit and community organizations that have the expertise to reengage these youth.
  - Develop or encourage public/private partnerships to create opportunities related to education, job training, employment, and health and wellness.
  - Establish a process or program(s) that identify at-risk individuals, or individuals who are already on the path to violent extremism, to which they can be referred for individualized assistance and support. These programs may identify reliable and consistent sources to make referrals such as schools, places of worship, social workers, or doctors; divert those who have begun the process of radicalization and may be on the path to violent extremism; and provide an opportunity for such individuals to transition back into mainstream society within their community.
  - Because individuals need to feel connected to their own communities, develop initiatives and educational material regarding civic participation for use in schools, community centers, and other gathering places; creating opportunities for individuals to engage in civic activism, inside and outside of the affected community; or ensuring that resources for civic activism are available and easily accessible.
- Encourage messaging through social media and other platforms that negate potential recruitment propaganda.
  - Aid affected communities in developing and promoting their own alternative narratives and counter-narratives. According to research and media reports, recruitment often happens via social media or through other digital means. Initiatives that focus on utilizing the same means to counter recruitment propaganda is a developing practice in countering terrorism recruitment. Initiatives should build the capacity of trusted messengers within a community and create awareness of common online message themes and propaganda techniques.
- Prioritize economic and community development in target areas to promote engagement and investment in at-risk communities.
  - Emphasize workforce development specific to local communities experiencing recruitment.

- Support the establishment of youth-oriented volunteer, internship, and employment opportunities. In Minnesota, individuals who are believed to have joined terrorist organizations have primarily been youth and young adults. Efforts to connect potentially impacted youth to their communities is a key strategy in recruitment prevention. Activities to support this strategy may include providing space for holding local networking events; collaboration with schools, local and regional employers, social workers, and community members to develop sustainable programs that lead to employment for young individuals; education and outreach related to job training and skills; trainings and awareness about life skills needed to secure and maintain opportunities, such as transit options and workplace expectations.
- Require transparency and accountability for all funds distributed for these purposes to build trust between governmental entities and the community.

## EVALUATION

The Department recommends that further study and evaluation be completed by independent research entities to determine the impact of potential strategies in preventing terrorism recruitment specifically related to Minnesota. The evaluation should focus on rates of participation and completion, and should establish a baseline status of participants for comparison with future work.

## CONCLUSION

Although other countries have a longer history of attempting to prevent terrorist recruitment, the United States is beginning to address this issue. The guiding principles in this report are thematic, preliminary and based on international experience and the latest academic research. The Department will distribute the \$250,000 allocated for this effort by engaging in a Request for Proposal (RFP) grant process that will direct responders to propose specific strategies and tactics that address the principles in this paper. Priority will be given to proposals that would result in long-term investment in the communities at risk of terrorist recruitment and which demonstrate government/community partnerships.



## SELECTED SOURCE MATERIAL

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