

LAPD modifies surveillance program of Muslims

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May 22, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service LOS ANGELES (RNS) After lobbying from Muslim and Sikh leaders, the Los Angeles Police Department has agreed to modify its information-gathering program on suspicious activities after the New York Police Department came under fire for spying on local Muslims.

Since 2008, the LAPD has used the federal Suspicious Activities Reporting (SAR) program to file reports on potential terrorist-related actions, such as someone photographing certain buildings. Sikh and Muslim leaders said the LAPD's Counter-Terrorism and Criminal Intelligence Bureau should ensure that future suspicious activity reports are prompted by actual behavior with apparently genuine criminal or terrorist elements.

Under the new guidelines, information that's gathered on what later is determined to be innocent behavior, but still remaining in SAR files, will be erased from counterterrorism databases.

"SAR is a reality," said Muslim Public Affairs Council President Salam Al-Marayati, who worked with the ACLU, the South Asian Network and the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund on the program changes. "We're removing noncriminal behavior from SAR reporting, and data on innocuous behavior is being purged."

Cmdr. Blake Chow of the LAPD's counterterrorism bureau called the changes an "example of our ability to reach out to the people we work with. There's a little bit of (information) regrouping. We're still going to be collecting suspicious activity reports. The program is still as robust as it is now."

Al-Marayati told RNS that unlike the problems with the NYPD's spying on Muslim groups, the Los Angeles reforms reflect police wanting to work with mosques and

not view Muslims with suspicion.

"The community engagement model can work; it's more effective," said Al-Marayati. "The mosques have rejected the al-Qaida ideology of death -- that's why it's even more important for law enforcement to partner with the mosques."