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North Huntingdon might join Secret Service cyber fraud task force



JOE NAPSHA | Friday, January 12, 2024 1:16 a.m.

North Huntingdon officials are expected to consider an agreement with the Secret Service that would allow its detectives to join the federal agency's cyber fraud task force and be trained to fight financially motivated cybercrime.

"We would be pretty much on the cutting edge for Westmoreland County," police Chief Robert Rizzo told the township commissioners last month.

The Secret Service provides free training and software for the detectives involved in the task force.

The police department's officers would benefit from the training they would receive through participation in the task force, said Commissioner Ronald Zona, a retired state police trooper and chief of the Westmoreland County detectives.

"It provides access to greater resources," Rizzo said.

North Huntingdon's detectives would not be pulled from township investigations to work on Secret Service cases, Rizzo said.

"I see zero risk. There is no financial commitment" on the part of the township, Rizzo said.

During a discussion last month, Commissioner Rich Gray said he was concerned because North Huntingdon Township is not mentioned in the agreement and the municipality should be involved in the decision.

Rizzo said he would contact the Secret Service to revise the agreement.

The initiative to have the township participate in the cyber fraud task force was "born out of a large investigation" where a resident initially lost tens of thousands of dollars through a cyber



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fraud scam.

"Fortunately, we were able to get much of it back," Rizzo said.

By having North Huntingdon detectives trained to work on the cyber fraud cases, there could be a quicker response time when there is a cyber crime, Rizzo said.

The Secret Service often recruits departments to join the task force after the agency works with a police department on one of its cases, said Timothy P. Burke, special agent in charge of the Pittsburgh field office.

Officers who would be selected for the task force would receive training in detecting cyber fraud and how to conduct forensic investigations on various devices, such as different cellphones and computers. Training sessions could be a week or longer, Burke said.

The cyber fraud task forces were created through a merger of the Secret Service electronics crimes and financial crimes task forces, the agency said in July 2020. The task forces are a partnership between the Secret Service, other law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, private industry and academia.

The Secret Service has cyber fraud task forces in about 40 field offices in the United States, Burke said. The agency said it wants to expand its network of similar task forces to 160 offices around the world.

The task force's work is important because "since covid, cyber crime has increased by 300%," said Brad Messner, an assistant professor of information systems and technology management at the University of Pittsburgh.

Having a local police department investigate the cyber fraud removes the need to wait on a federal agency to handle the case.

"If there's not a quick response, sometimes there is little or no trace (of the cyber fraud) at all. The damage is done, and the trace disappears," Messner said.

If North Huntingdon approves its police department to join the cyber fraud task force, "they're going to become the police department that most others will reach out to" in the cyber fraud crimes, Messner said.

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