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Local leaders band together to plan 'Dark Screen' initiative

James Aldridge

San Antonio leaders are quietly putting together a plan to conduct local cyberterrorism exercises as a way to gauge the public- and private-sectors' preparedness for any future strike by hackers.

Dubbed "Dark Screen," the exercise will involve private businesses and units of local, state and federal government. The goal is to test the community's ability to meet the challenges of detecting, preventing and deterring such an attack.

In a March 7 letter written by U.S. Rep. Ciro Rodriguez to Mayor Ed Garza and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff, the congressman urges local participation as a way to make San Antonio a national test bed for fighting cyberterrorist attacks. The letter was also sent to officials with the San Antonio Water System, City Public Service, the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Air Force and University of Texas at San Antonio's Center for Infrastructure Assurance and Security.

In the wake of the letter, officials from the Air Intelligence Agency -- which is based at Lackland Air Force Base -- and UTSA have organized meetings to help plan the Dark Screen exercise.

Testimony provided by Rodriguez to the House Oversight Panel on Terrorism indicates that in the days following Sept. 11, there has been a dramatic rise in attempts to break into the military's computer systems.

"Despite the increased efforts to detect, prevent and deter cyber attacks, the United States' critical infrastructure still faces a potential 'electronic Pearl Harbor' that would have catastrophic consequences," Rodriguez wrote in his March 7 letter.

If the congressman can engender support for San Antonio's initiative, it would be the first exercises in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the letter states. The last time the NSA conducted cyber exercises in the United States was in 1997, according to Rodriguez.

No official timeline has been set to conduct the coordinated exercises, although work is being planned for Spring 2003, according to local organizers. All the logistical details are still being ironed out and local organizers say meetings are underway currently to determine which entities will do what.

The Air Intelligence Agency will likely commit resources to the exercise -- although Air Force officials declined to comment until plans are solidified.

Neither Mayor Garza nor County Judge Wolff could be reached for comment. However, last fall the city and Bexar County did collaborate on a similar bioterrorism readiness initiative.

There are those in the business community who say these exercises could help local information security firms gauge what vulnerabilities exist. The exercises would allow them to develop products and services to market to the Department of Defense and the private sector.

Danny Mills, chief executive officer of SecureInfo Corp., says while he cannot speak directly to the inner workings of the city's plans, he supports the concept of working on the local and state level to gauge the threats to water systems, power grids and public safety.

"We applaud the city's efforts and we are actively involved in locking our city's critical IT infrastructure down. Once the plans have been put in place, it would be our intention to help implement that plan," Mills says.

These exercises could also dovetail with the state's efforts to step up local governments' response capabilities from cyberterrorist attacks since virtually all aspects of public safety involve electronic systems.

Texas Attorney General John Cornyn's office convened a State Infrastructure Protection Advisory Committee that released a final report detailing the committee's list of recommendations.

Mike Viesca, a spokesman for Cornyn, says committee members were briefed on the local proposal. Glenn Dietrich, chairman of the Department of Information Systems at UTSA, which manages the Center for Infrastructure Assurance and Security, was a committee member.

In the state's report, released two weeks ago, one of the committee's recommendations is that all state agencies and departments undergo a Systems Vulnerability Review.



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