Written by **Raven Clabough** on October 17, 2012

N.J. $5.7M Anti-Terror Program a Practical and Fiscal Failure

According to Judicial Watch, the U.S. government has spent almost $6 million on an experimental "anti-terrorism" program in New Jersey called "Text Against Terror." The plan, which encouraged the public to send in tips regarding potential terrorism via text messages from their cellphones, has proved to be a significant practical and fiscal failure.

The initiative was the invention of NJ Transit Police Chief Christopher Trucillo, who was a Port Authority police captain on September 11, 2001. Following that time, he was sent to Israel to study counterterrorism techniques.

The project began in June of 2011. According to the press release for Text Against Terror's initiation on the NJ Transit Police's website, the plan was that customers would be able to "report suspicious activity, packages or vehicles around NJ Transit facilities or onboard the system by sending a text message to NJTPD (65873)." Messages are routed directly to the NJ Transit Police Department.

The program was meant to complement the NJ Transit's existing security hotline, 1888-TIPS-NJT, a number that customers could use to call in suspicious activity or unattended packages.

But Trucillo believed that the new plan would prove to be beneficial as texting has become a preferred method of communication, according to a *New York Times* article he had read.

Trucillo brainstormed with NJ Transit officials on what method people were most likely to use on crowded buses or trains:

> We looked at what people use, what is the most convenient mode people are most comfortable with.
>
> Our customers are in a closed, tight environment; we're asking them to report suspicious behavior, but we have to make it safe for them. They may not feel comfortable picking up the phone when someone is sitting two seats away. Text tips are convenient.

Trucillo said of his project at the time it was launched,

> As the eyes and ears of the NJ TRANSIT system, our customers and employees are the first line of defense in the war against terror, so it is critical that we all remain vigilant and aware of our surroundings. This new initiative enables us to harness the prevalence of text-messaging among our customers to enhance the security of our transit system.

After just one year of Text Against Terror's existence, however, there are indications that the program is a boondoggle. Judicial Watch explains,

> Since it was launched in mid-2011, the federally-funded "Text Against Terror" project has produced no credible tips, according to a local newspaper report that reveals the feds have poured $5.8

> million into the initiative. Police in New Jersey claim 307 tips have been texted so far and that includes people "testing the system."

Trucillo reported that just 71 of the 307 text messages "referred to something regarding homeland security," all of which were "eliminated as a cause for concern. Someone saw something that made them uncomfortable that required us to take secondary action, like an unattended bag or someone taking pictures in a particular area."

However, "in a rare instance, we need to follow them up and refer them to the Joint Terrorism Task Force," he added. That task force includes the state police, the NJ Transit, the Port Authority police, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and several other agencies.

When asked to discuss the nature of the text messages that required further investigation by the task force, Trucillo responded, "We can't discuss those things. There have been things investigated by the joint task force."

The rest of the messages were from people either seeking customer service information or texting a wrong number.

All text messages receive a confirmation text back from the NJ Transit police stating that a text message was received, regardless of the purpose of the text.

Local news publication *Asbury Park Press* reported on some of the costs of the program:

> The "Text Against Terror" program was funded in fiscal year 2011 with a $5.775 million U.S. Department of Homeland Security public awareness grant, which paid for advertising time on radio and television, printing wallet cards, fliers and bus and train ads and reserving the NJTPD domain for text messages.

Advertisements for the program have also been played on New York stations, which have among the highest advertising rates in the country.

Occurrences of those ads increased dramatically in the weeks leading up to the 11th anniversary of 9/11, airing a total of 4,023 times on radio and television between August 27 and September 8, reports *Asbury Park Press*.

Additionally, the costs for the upkeep of the NJTPD domain and for unlimited texting capability are $13,400. Trucillo notes, "Absent the grant, it's likely we would not be able to find the funds."

In defense of the extravagant cost of a seemingly wasteful program, he said,

> We're not doing it to waste valuable tax dollars or that we don't have anything else to do.
>
> We live in a dangerous world and in an area where two significant terrorist events happened [in 1993 and 2001]. We ask people to understand that we do it with their best interests in mind and to make the public aware of counterterrorism efforts, so we can keep mass transit safe.

Unsurprisingly, while a number of news outlets are noting the seeming futility of the" Text Against Terror" program, based on the article in the *Asbury Park Press*, the Homeland Security News Wire pointed to the same article in the *Asbury Park Press* as proof of "success."

The Text Against Terror program is just a micro example of the runaway costs of the War on Terror. It seems almost ironic that the project began in June 2011 at approximately the same time Reuters reported on the staggering costs of the wars. Reuters wrote that the total cost of the wars in Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan will reach as high as $3.7 trillion dollars, a figure they borrowed from the research project "Costs of War" by Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies.

Additionally, in 2013 alone, the cost of the Department of Homeland Security will run taxpayers $35.5 billion for its national security activities, according to the White House website.

Using figures from various federal government agencies and budgets, TomDispatch.com reported that the total cost of national security for 2013 will be approximately $930 billion. Putting that figure into perspective, TomDispatch.com writes, "If our national security budget were its own economy, it would be the 19th largest in the world, roughly the size of Australia's. Meanwhile, the country with the next largest military budget, China, spends a mere pittance by comparison. The most recent estimate puts China's military funding at around $136 billion."

The National Priorities Project has determined that the total cost of spending in defense and homeland security since the attacks of September 11, 2001 is more than $7.6 trillion.

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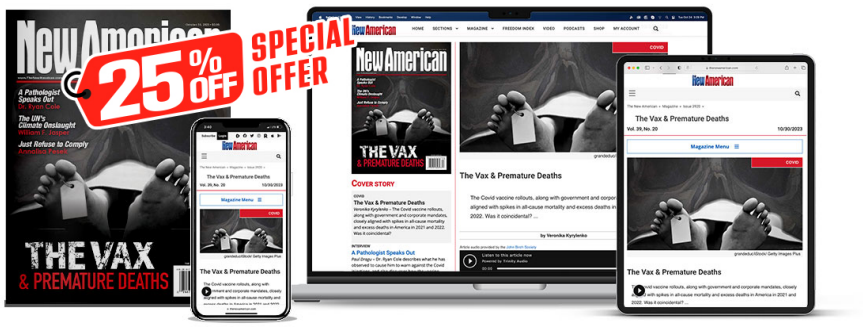

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