

Voluntary interviews

Local police asked to help question Middle Eastern men

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Local police departments asked to help federal officials interview dozens of men from the Middle East say they'll cooperate with the effort.

Police chiefs, representatives from multicultural groups and even some Arab-Americans say they understand the reasons behind what U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Collins calls "voluntary" meetings. Reportedly, the men will be asked about their travel plans and whether they are sympathetic with terrorists, among other questions.

In a letter dated Nov. 26, which was sent to men in Farmington, Farmington Hills, Troy, Ann Arbor, Dearborn and Detroit, among other communities, Collins wrote:

"Your name was brought to our attention because, among other things, you came to Michigan on a visa from a country where there are groups that support, advocate or finance international terrorism. We have no reason to believe that you are, in any way, associated with terrorist activities."

Lt. Ben McDermott
Livonia Police Department

able for the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"These are non-immigrants here on visas," said Hills Police Chief Bill Dwyer, who is also a mem-



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*William Dwyer
Hills Police Chief/president Michigan Assoc. of Chiefs of Police*

ber of an Anti-Terrorism Task Force and serves as president of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police.

"Our country is at war, and these persons may have valuable information."

Dwyer said local police were asked to help because the interviews are on a "fast track." He said departments would assign an officer to team with a federal agent for each meeting.

Six men living in Farmington Hills and two in Farmington received letters. The majority went to Dearborn (217), Ann Arbor (79) and Detroit (67).

Farmington Public Safety Director Gary Goss said his department will help. "I think every police agency wants to cooperate. We're going to do whatever we have to do to support the effort."

Livonia Lt. Ben McDermott said he received a letter requesting assistance with the interviews late Tuesday. He hadn't yet determined whether anyone in his community had gotten interview letters. However, he believes his department will cooperate.

"We will attempt to assist them in whatever capacity we can do that," McDermott said. "I'm fairly certain it will be within what we'd be willing to do."

Garden City Police Chief David Harvey said that he had just received a request from the U.S. Attorney's Office. The head of the detective bureau will

be the contact person and assign a detective to assist with the interviews.

Harvey had no details about how many people would be interviewed or what it would entail.

"I really don't have any reservations about this. We'd do it for any law enforcement agency that requested our assistance," he said. "We do that on a regular basis."

Because the interviews are voluntary, Karen Bolsen of the Multicultural Multiracial Community Council of Farmington and Farmington Hills said council members have not seen them as an issue.

"The people do have opportunity for legal representation and they can choose the location," she said. "Our country is looking for any information we can. We're at war."

For Hashim Al-Tawil, outreach coordinator with the Arab-American and Chaldean Council, today's headlines bring back memories a decade old.

"To me, it's kind of like I've been through this before. In 1990, when the war with Iraq was about to start, there was a similar action by the FBI," he said.

Then a graduate student at the University of Iowa, Al-Tawil was informed because he was Iraqi, all of his student records would be turned over to the government.

"It was OK with me, because I thought 'I have nothing to hide,'" he said. "I look at it from a personal point of view. When anything comes to a national security concern, I think the authority

has the right to take these measures."

"Of course," he added, "it doesn't sound like America."

Dwyer said he knew some would protest the requests for interviews; however, he stressed this action was not "racial profiling," the singling out of individuals by law enforcement based on racial or ethnic characteristics.

"It's not profiling. These are people here from terrorist countries who are being asked to come in voluntarily," he said. "I know the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) is going to have problems with this."

Al-Tawil believes this action is a sort of profiling, but he sees a deeper effect on people who have come here to make a new life.

"All of a sudden, the world looks very narrow. We have looked at America as a refuge, where people come to seek freedom and liberty. People have already lost their homeland. Now they feel they are about to lose their liberty, even though they don't know whether that's true."

The world has completely changed since Sept. 11, Dwyer said.

"This is necessary. It's not intended to have a negative impact on people and make them feel like suspects."

— staff writer Leanne Rogers contributed to this story

Training from page A1

understand the community you're policing, especially with the diversity in Farmington Hills.

In some cultures, for instance, an officer won't get anywhere unless he speaks to the head of the household. That could be the father, grandfather or other elder.

The most important aspect of the training for Officer Suroor Shamoun, who is Chaldean, has been learning how to approach people and "read between the

lines." People who are Hispanic, for instance, will come right up close to an officer while they're talking. Officers learn in police academy to keep a distance from the people they encounter, for safety reasons.

"We have to ask people to move back," Shamoun said. "We're nice about it."

Born in Iraq, Shamoun came to the U.S. when he was six or seven years old. He became a citizen 10 years later and worked

long hours in his parents' stores. A self-described "people person," he saw and heard about incidents that led him to study law enforcement.

"I thought if I could become a police officer, I could help out and give a better understanding," he said, adding he has accomplished that goal by assisting directly or interpreting for other officers.

In addition, Shamoun has brought in people from the Chaldean community to help

with diversity training. Other speakers have represented the Japanese and African-American communities and the Jain Society, as well as the elderly population.

Bastianelli, who coaches wrestling in Southfield, said virtually all of his wrestlers are African-American. What he does for a living generally comes as a shock.

He asks his new recruits to close their eyes and picture an officer. Their usual response is a

vision of a young, white man in uniform chasing, kicking or beating someone — which he dispels by telling them about his profession.

"It's very powerful," Bastianelli said. "These kids have no idea they've been coached by a police officer."

The department supports his coaching activities, Brown said. "There's a benefit to law enforcement and to the community with him interacting with those young men. It's breaking down

the stereotypes we all have."

That also applies to diversity training in Farmington Hills, Bastianelli said.

"When you put on the blue uniform, you treat everyone the same way and with the same respect you want them to treat you or your family."



PHOTO BY BEATRICE PAT BROWN

Neighborhoods from page A1

"I think overall, we are dealing in what is a chronic problem of race, and Canton's like any other community."

In the 10 years since the last census, the community's white population dropped from around 92 percent to 83 percent, Moore added. A similar shift has happened in Farmington Hills, although racial problems there surfaced more than a decade ago.

Karen Bolsen, co-chairwoman of the Multicultural Multiracial Community Council, said incidents in the schools led school and city officials to sit down with parents and talk about the city's increasing diversity in the late 1980s. A formal council convened in the early 1990s.

"We had the initial and sustained support of two city councils and the school board," she said. "But it was more of a grass roots effort. There was participation with the parents, the business community. I think we've got the ideal situation."

A similar effort has been underway in Livonia since 1992. PLAID is People of Livonia Addressing Issues of Diversity, which aims to promote acceptance of all people "because a community's diversity is a strength." The group isn't large right now, but sponsors the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration in conjunction with the school districts and the city's Human Relations Commission.

That commission was created by the city council in 1966 and meets regularly to focus on resolving racial, religious or ethnic complaints, civil rights enforcement and more. The group also awards residents and groups for encouraging and fostering diversity with its annual Honor Roll Awards.

A blend of citizen and government efforts has also worked in Redford Township, which has faced the diversity issue head on with a program that sets neighbors down in small groups to talk about their differences.

The first round of such grassroots community meetings were conducted this past summer, and more are scheduled for early next year.

The meetings were the brain child of Kevin Kelley, Redford Township supervisor, who saw an increasing trend of African-Americans moving into the community.

Census change
"In the 1990 census it was less than 2 percent and it was 8 in the last one," he said.

The sessions last summer helped some residents find a common ground, he said. Kelley has extended diversity training to the township police department.

"We do have a changing community," said Shelly Katz, community development director, who runs the program.

The diversity training isn't expensive. It's just

people meeting. But it's a "major commitment," said Katz, adding that the sessions are three hours in duration. Those who attend are expected to participate, she said. But there are rewards. "People realize they have the same goals, to live in a nice community," she said.

Some new residents felt excluded, but on the other hand, longtime residents weren't certain how to react to newer residents. But in the end, "people realized they have the same goals," she said. "People are shooting for the same things."

Sept. 11
While the Sept. 11 attacks have put a new emphasis on diversity training, Redford officials had included Arabic issues prior to the events.

An agency from Dearborn composed of Pakistani natives helped plan the Redford diversity meetings. Things can get personal and intense during the sessions. Katz found herself drawn in when a question was asked. It was: "Where were your grandparents born?"

"Most everybody's were born here, mine weren't," she said.

The training goal is to have a group of 30 to 40 people and then break it down into smaller groups.

"Everybody gets to know everybody," she said. "You have to be willing to express yourself and be open. Sometimes it's hard to reflect on certain things in your life."

Apart from winter sessions, Redford Township is looking to reach out and is looking for clubs, churches and groups that want to participate in the training. There will be a tangible result of the program at the township's annual Old Fashion Christmas celebration on Dec. 6. There will be a display of different religious cultures in the township hall near where Santa will be holding court.

"It's a step," she acknowledged Katz.

— staff writer Dave Varga and Joni Hubred also contributed to this story

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Reaching out: Mosques in Canton and Farmington Hills have hosted open houses to encourage understanding.