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Tong leads efforts for \$10M improvement to law enforcement databases

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Tucked inside a Democratic bill to overhaul the state's criminal justice system is an estimated \$10 million technological initiative crafted by state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, to establish a database for law enforcement agencies to share information on offenders.

Tong calls it SHIELD, but the name is not an acronym.

"I called it SHIELD because I think that's what it does," Tong said. "I feel very strongly this is addressing the very thing that went wrong in Cheshire."

In July, Jennifer Hawke-Petit and her 17- and 11-year-old daughters were murdered in their home. A pair of paroled career criminals are charged in the crime. Since then, state lawmakers vowed to overhaul Connecticut's approach to criminal justice, including its archaic and often incompatible computer systems.

Tong and others believe the murders would not have happened if the Board of Pardons and Paroles had received a sentencing transcript in which a judge described one of the accused killers as a "cold-blooded predator."

"If I'm on the (parole) board and saw that language, I probably would not have supported releasing them," Tong said.

In September, state Sen. Andrew McDonald, D-Stamford, and state Rep. Michael Lawlor, D-East Haven, co-chairmen of the Judiciary Committee, tapped Tong to focus on reforming how state criminal justice agencies collect and share data on individuals in the system.

An attorney experienced in coordinating information-gathering among several law firms, Tong reviewed criminal databases in other states, including Pennsylvania.

The results are in a bill crafted by McDonald and Lawlor - one of 15 criminal justice proposals up for a public hearing before the Judiciary Committee tomorrow.

SHIELD would be a secure, centralized, integrated database providing biographical information, vital



statistics and tracking information for offenders and former offenders still living, Tong said.

It would allow state and municipal police, the chief state's attorney, the judicial branch, and the departments of Correction and Public Safety, as well as the Board of Pardons and Paroles to scan, review and update police reports, presentence investigations, psychological and medical reports, criminal records, incarceration and parole records, and court records and transcripts.

The data would be indexed and cross-referenced by the offender's name, residence, criminal offense and other information.

The public would have access to some of the information, subject to privacy protections.

Tong said he also wants SHIELD to contain analytical tools.

"I can imagine a system that, for example, tracks four, five, six, 10 key indicators of recidivism," he said. "If somebody's been unemployed for six months, perhaps, there could be an alert in this system that tells the department of corrections reach out to them and see what's going on . . . before they commit a crime again."

Tong said such information would help law enforcement agencies take pre-emptive action.

"I understand the risks of people trivializing information sharing or marginalizing it because they regard it as bureaucratic details," Tong said. "But this is the guts. This is where a lot of the real work needs to be done to keep our families safe."

In September, Chief State's Attorney Kevin Kane told the Judiciary Committee that improving communication among law enforcement agencies could help prevent tragedies.

"I wouldn't even say we have a woeful information technology system," Kane said. "It's practically nonexistent. . . . This is silly in this day and age."

Tong's proposal recommends that SHIELD, which he estimates would cost \$10 million and take several years to establish, be designed and implemented by the state budget office and department of information technology.

The project would be overseen by an 11-member commission with representatives of law enforcement offices.

The legislation, if adopted, calls for the group to submit reports to the legislature every Jan. 1 and July 1.

Tong hopes to be appointed to the commission as a representative for McDonald and Lawlor.

"I'd like to be, and expect I would be," he said. "I'm not just dashing this off and jumping out."

House Minority Leader Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, said lawmakers will support the project, and residents may believe such a system already exists.

"In a \$17 billion budget, \$10 million or \$11 million is peanuts," Cafero said.

Some proposals up for public hearing tomorrow seek to legislate more immediate improvements in communication. One was generated by state Rep. Gerald Fox, D-Stamford, an attorney.

"The technology issue requires a complete overhaul and my experience has been it's going to take some time to get there," Fox said.

His legislation specifies that the Board of Pardons and Paroles not hold a hearing unless all members have reviewed an offender's file, including criminal records, policy reports, pre-sentence investigations and sentencing transcripts.

"My thought was, let's determine whose responsibility it is to gather all this information and make sure" it gets to the board, Fox said.

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