Program to implant RFID tags in homeless
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WASHINGTON (UPI) -- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said Thursday that it was about to begin testing a new technology designed to help more closely monitor and assist the nation's homeless population.

Under the pilot program, which grew out of a series of policy academies held in the last two years, homeless people in participating cities will be implanted with mandatory Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags that social workers and police can use track their movements.

The RFID technology was developed by HHS' Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in partnership with five states, including California and New York. "This is a rare opportunity to use advanced technology to meet society's dual objectives of better serving our homeless population while making our cities safer," HRSA Administrator Betty James Duke said...

The miniscule RFID tags are no larger than a matchstick and will be implanted subdermally, meaning under the skin. Data from RFID tracking stations mounted on telephone poles will be transmitted to police and social service workers, who will use custom Windows NT software to track movements of the homeless in real time.

In what has become a chronic social problem, people living in shelters and on the streets do not seek adequate medical care and frequently contribute to the rising crime rate in major cities. Supporters of subdermal RFID tracking say the technology will discourage implanted homeless men and women from committing crimes, while making it easier for government workers to provide social services such as delivering food and medicine.

Duke called the RFID tagging pilot program "a high-tech, minimally-intrusive way for the government to lift our citizens away from the twin perils of poverty and crime." Participating cities include New York City, San Francisco, Washington, and Bethlehem, Penn.

Participating states will receive grants of $14 million to $58 million from the federal Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness

(PATH) program, which was created under the McKinney Act to fund support services for the homeless. A second phase of the project, scheduled to be completed in early 2005, will wirelessly transmit live information on the locations of homeless people to handheld computers running the Windows CE operating system.

A spokesman for the National Coalition for the Homeless, which estimates that there are between 2.3 million and 3.5 million people experiencing homelessness nationwide, said the pilot program could be easily abused.

"We have expressed our tentative support for the idea to HRSA, but only if it includes privacy safeguards," the spokesman said. "So far it's unclear whether those safeguards will actually be in place by roll-out."

Chris Hoofnagle, deputy director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, said the mandatory RFID program would be vulnerable to a legal challenge. "It is a glaring violation of the Tenth Amendment, which says that powers not awarded to the government are reserved to the people, and homeless people have just as many Tenth Amendment rights as everyone else," said Hoofnagle, who is speaking about homeless privacy at this month's Computers Freedom and Privacy conference in Berkeley, Calif.

While HRSA's program appears to be the first to forcibly implant humans with RFID tags, the technology is becoming more widely adopted as retailers use it to track goods. Wal-Mart Stores said last year that it will require its top 100 suppliers to place RFID tags on shipping crates and pallets by January 2005.

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