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Beefing up the mall guard



By David Conti
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Wearing a big puffy coat to the mall on a hot day this summer might not be such a good idea.

By then, security guards at some shopping centers across the country will have undergone training in how to spot terrorists and respond to chemical and biological attacks.

You see, the fidgety guy in the heavy coat fits the profile of a suicide bomber, according to the training program developed by George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute. The training also teaches guards about terrorist groups, types of attacks and how they can help police and emergency workers in the event of an incident.

"These security professionals will have the same basic foundation of awareness as the police, firefighters and EMS," said Paul M. Maniscalco, the principal investigator and senior research scientist for the project. "It's necessary because malls and shopping centers really are today's modern-day town squares."

The International Council of Shopping Centers paid about \$2 million to the university to develop and implement the computer-based training program after surveying many of the 1,200 enclosed malls in the country. It found inconsistent approaches to anti-terrorism training at shopping centers, which law enforcement and homeland security officials consider "soft targets" for attacks.

"To have standardized training is a good practice, not just in preventing a true terrorist incident," said Larry Likar, a former FBI agent who teaches at LaRoche College in McCandless. He said malls will likely participate for insurance purposes.

The council consulted with some of the country's largest mall management companies, including Simon Property Group, which operates three of the largest malls in the Pittsburgh region.

Officials at Simon would not say whether guards at Ross Park, South Hills Village and Century III malls would participate in the training. But Malachy Kavanagh, a spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers, said guards employed by Simon were among those giving the program a test-run this month.

Detective William Barrett, a spokesman for Ross police, said if the guards at Ross Park get trained to respond to such attacks, it "will help everyone involved."

"They would be the first ones there if something happened," Barrett said. "It's important to make sure they know what to expect from us and we know what to expect from them in such a situation."

Forest City Enterprises, which operates the Mall at Robinson and Station Square, is "looking closely at the training program" to determine if its guards will participate, said spokeswoman Shema Krinsky. Officials at Monroeville Mall and SouthSide Works did not return calls for comment.

"Most companies said they embrace this and some will make it mandatory for their guards," Kavanagh said. "There's no cost to the companies."

The university and trade group have prepared about 20,000 training manuals and DVDs to send to malls during the next six weeks, Kavanagh said. The program consists of 10 chapters highlighted by videos and other multimedia activities. Guards complete online tests after each section.

Maniscalco said the developers worked with authorities from Europe, Israel and Moscow who have dealt with attacks in marketplaces -- and filmed some video at the Boulevard Mall in Las Vegas -- to make the training more applicable to mall guards.

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