

California State Senate

SENATOR
SABRINA CERVANTES
THIRTY-FIRST SENATE DISTRICT



February 11, 2026

The Honorable John Harabedian
Chair, Joint Legislative Audit Cmte.
41st Assembly District
Swing Space, Suite 4350
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Christopher Cabaldon
Vice Chair, Joint Legislative Audit Cmte.
3rd Senate District
Swing Space, Suite 7320
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Request for an Audit of Fusion Centers in California

Chair Harabedian and Vice Chair Cabaldon:

I write you to request a state audit to investigate the operations and status of fusion centers in California. These centers have operated in secrecy for three decades—for far too long. There are five known fusion centers in California at the direction of the State Threat Assessment Center (STAC): the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center (NCRIC) based in San Francisco; the Central California Intelligence Center (CCIC) based in Sacramento; the Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC) based in Los Angeles; the San Diego Law Enforcement Coordination Center (SD-LECC) based in San Diego; and the Orange County Intelligence Assessment Center (OCIAC) based in Orange County. These centers are part of the National Fusion Center Enterprise and are among the 80 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) designated fusion centers within the National Fusion Center Association.

STAC is California's state primary fusion center as designated by the Governor of California and is operated by the California Highway Patrol (CHP), the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CalOES), and the California Department of Justice (Cal DOJ). STAC serves as California's information sharing clearinghouse of strategic threat analysis and situational awareness reporting to statewide leadership and the public safety community in support of efforts to prevent, prepare for, mitigate, and respond to threats against the people and infrastructure of California.

The State Threat Assessment System (STAS) partnership brings together federal, state, local, and tribal authorities and their respective law enforcement and private sector partners, public safety, and criminal information systems, including those of DHS and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). At the federal level, the FBI and DHS have devoted an unknown number of resources to California. At the state level, CalOES partners with CHP to provide daily strategic analysis and tactical support, while state agency partners including the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), Department of Justice (CalDOJ), and Department of Public Health (CDPH) also contribute personnel or resources to advance anti-terrorism objectives of the STAS. At the local level, local law enforcement and emergency management departments also share personnel and resources to STAS.

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, California created its first state homeland security fusion center. In 2004, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security developed a plan to establish four regional, locally owned and operated fusion centers supported through state funding. The distribution of four regional fusion centers mirrors that of the four federal court districts in California. The STAS network consists of STAC, four regional threat assessment centers (RTACs), and an RTAC subordinate major urban area fusion center. Fusion centers, few of which existed before the September 11 attacks, now number as many as 80 according to DHS and operate in almost every state and many major cities in the country. Their existence has stirred concerns about domestic intelligence gathering practices, and questions about the federal government's involvement in state and local law enforcement operations.

No single piece of federal or state legislation established this national network of fusion centers, defined its mission, or authorized it to operate as a decentralized domestic intelligence collection mechanism feeding the federal intelligence community with information gathered from every part of American life. The network operates in secret and under ambiguous lines of authority. It includes not only federal, state, and local law enforcement, but also other public and private entities that have no legal or statutory authority to collect or disseminate intelligence about Americans. The public has little access to information regarding what their local fusion centers do in their communities or even the individuals who work there. Fusion centers were originally created with the laudable goal of preventing terrorism. However, over the nearly three decades since their establishment and with limited formal oversight, these centers have seen a significant expansion in their surveillance and targeting activities to include broad domestic activities. The infrastructure established at fusion centers is designed to gather considerable information about individuals' identities, movements, activities, and relationships from various aspects of their lives, and to collect and collate this data to multiple levels of government and private entities for analysis and decision-making.

Fusion centers incorporate federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel, first responders, and select private-sector representatives to collect, analyze, and distribute intelligence. While the federal government initially promoted them as hubs for sharing counterterrorism information, fusion centers quickly expanded their missions to include any form of perceived threat. DHS provides these centers with unknown funding, personnel, and access to state and federal intelligence, but they failed to ensure that they have used these resources appropriately. Fusion centers are predominantly staffed by state and local law enforcement, with key contributions from emergency management, public health agencies, the National Guard, and carefully chosen private-sector participants and contractors. Since 2007, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has taken on the essential role of primary federal liaison to these critical fusion centers. There is no publicly available information detailing how state and national fusion centers allocate their spending between counterterrorism, domestic crimes, and hazards.

A comprehensive congressional study conducted in 2012 by a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs revealed significant inconsistencies in states' compliance with federal requirements to audit the expenditures of grant funds for fusion centers. The study found that states frequently failed to keep track of fusion center spending separately from other programs. The Subcommittee's two-year investigation concluded that DHS support for fusion centers has resulted in little, if any, benefit to federal counterterrorism intelligence efforts. After reviewing 13 months of reports from fusion centers between 2009 and 2010, the investigation found that DHS-assigned personnel at these centers often forwarded "intelligence" of inconsistent quality. Much of it was poorly constructed, rarely provided in a timely manner, and at times could endanger the civil liberties and privacy of Americans. The Subcommittee's investigation revealed that DHS did not provide sufficient training for personnel assigned to the highly sensitive task of reporting information. This responsibility carried by these personnel carries significant risks of violating the Privacy Act, which protects individuals' rights to lawfully engage in their constitutional rights without significant surveillance by their own government.

In 2020, fusion centers regularly tracked the overwhelmingly nonviolent protests about racial justice across the country in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. As a result, fusion centers issued bulletins that were poorly sourced, sensationalized, and often unable to point to specific threat information. These bulletins frequently cited rumors or disinformation spread by anonymous social media posters or right-wing media sites, rarely identified individuals suspected of specific criminal activities. Rather, they routinely insinuated that the protestors were collectively responsible for any crimes committed during demonstrations and broadly labeled them as anarchists or “ANTIFA” (shorthand for anti-fascists), echoing language that President Donald Trump used to demonize protesters. The Northern California fusion center issued several warnings regarding Black Lives Matter protests in the region. These bulletins—sent to over 14,000 police officers—did not provide specific threat information but nonetheless characterized the rallies as potentially dangerous. They claimed that “some of these events involve criminal activities such as planned looting, vandalism, and threats of violence.”

Additionally, environmental advocacy groups, particularly those focused on protecting Native American lands from pipeline construction, often find themselves under review by fusion centers. A lawsuit initiated by activists and organizers in Oregon asserted that the state’s fusion center has, over the years, conducted surveillance of environmental advocacy groups, community organizations, and Native American tribes that express concerns.

Fusion centers face ongoing challenges in ensuring the security of sensitive information within their systems. In 2020, a breach occurred when hacktivists exploited a security vulnerability at a contractor operating in conjunction with a fusion center, leading to the unauthorized access of 269 gigabytes of sensitive data collected by 251 law enforcement agencies from 1996 to 2020, including the FBI, DHS, and the National Guard. A U.S. Senate review, along with findings from BlueLeaks and responses to Freedom of Information Law requests, indicates that some fusion centers may lack a focused mission and suffered from mission creep. The BlueLeaks documents bring attention to four fusion centers that collaborate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on deportation matters, providing various surveillance tools to individuals who identify themselves as ICE agents. For instance, the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center has routinely requested access to DMV records, social media information, and license plate data. Additionally, ICE employees routinely gather social media and open-source information, including intensely personal details like friends and family lists, home addresses, and workplace locations. DHS even relies on the Northern California Fusion Center for social media posts because ICE agents are prohibited from directly accessing Facebook at work. In California, ICE has informally sought assistance from the Orange County Fusion Center to help locate immigrants' vehicles. While ICE has a contract with Motorola that allows it to search through thousands of license plate readers nationwide, it is restricted from accessing data from jurisdictions that opt out, such as those governed by Senate Bill 54.

Despite state laws like Senate Bill 54, local law enforcement has repeatedly requested the Northern California Fusion Center to search ICE's Data Analysis System database, which contains information on “deportable” individuals. Law enforcement officers who identify a suspect but lack sufficient evidence to obtain a warrant can circumvent the warrant process by asking ICE to initiate deportation proceedings. This process enables officers to misuse their access to these systems to target individuals solely based on personal disputes, as there are no safeguards to prevent abuses. Participating in a nationwide network of 80 state and regional fusion centers inherently undermines laws intended to protect our immigrant communities like Senate Bill 54.

Fusion centers have significantly exaggerated threat warnings issued by the FBI and DHS by inaccurately categorizing pro-choice activists alongside anti-abortion activists as potential "abortion-related violent extremists." As states implement stricter abortion and gender affirming care laws, investigations targeting individuals who seek, provide, or support access to reproductive services are likely to fall under the fusion centers' broad mandate to address "all crimes." This suggests a strong likelihood that fusion centers will

respond to law enforcement requests for assistance in targeting individuals who are exercising their constitutional right to seek reproductive or contraceptive services.

I am profoundly alarmed by the threat that fusion centers pose to the constitutional rights and privacy of Californians, and the blatant lack of transparency and oversight that they currently operate under. Fusion center personnel have unrestricted access to extensive government and private-sector data systems and information-sharing platforms, yet their usage of these systems are largely exempt from public and legislative oversight. Entities within the Legislature have made repeated attempts to gather information about fusion centers through formal inquiries and public records requests, all to no avail.

The largely unregulated operation of fusion centers in California raises significant constitutional and privacy concerns, especially at a time when emerging technologies, increasing government overreach, and the federal government's descent into authoritarianism is converging to undermine the public safety, privacy, and constitutional rights of all Americans. To that end, I request approval of an audit so that that the State Auditor can assist the Legislature in answering the following questions:

I. Legal Authority and Limitations

- a) Cite legal basis for establishing and operating fusion centers.
- b) Cite all legal authorities, regulations, and policies that govern fusion center activities (i.e., data collection, access, analysis, dissemination, and retention).
- c) Provide reports of all audits, reviews, investigations regarding potential violations for the past 10 years.
- d) Provide anonymized description of disciplinary measures taken for reported violations.

II. Personnel

- a) Provide the title, duties, and salaries of each person who is employed by, works in, or has direct access to the fusion center in either a full-time or part-time position.
- b) For each person listed above, please answer the following questions:
 - i. Who selects the individual? What is the vetting process required to authorize their access to law enforcement or contracted systems and data bases? Who trains them? Who supervises them? Who conducts performance reviews? Who investigates potential violations of law, regulations, or policy?
 - ii. What State and Local Law Enforcement agencies have personnel assigned to the fusion center? Who determines which agencies are allowed to participate? How do other state and local law enforcement agencies obtain intelligence, data, or assistance from the fusion center?
 - iii. What Federal Law Enforcement and Intelligence agencies have officers and analysts assigned to the fusion center? Who selects them? Who supervises them?
 - iv. Are National Guard members assigned to the fusion center? Under what authority? Who is responsible for ensuring these members operate within legal requirements?
 - v. What other government agencies (non-law enforcement) participate in the fusion center? Who selects them? What systems and databases do they have access to? Who is responsible for ensuring their compliance with restrictions on accessing law enforcement information?
- c) Name any private sector entities that participate in fusion center activities, or receive information processed through the fusion center that are not otherwise available to the public? Who selects these private entities and determines their suitability for access to sensitive law enforcement information? Who does the background investigations to determine if the private sector participants are suitable for giving access to sensitive law enforcement information collected at fusion centers? Is there a review to ensure there are no conflicts of interest with private entities participating in the fusion center? Are they paid with State or Federal funds?

- d) Are any private contractors given access to the fusion center, or information produced by the fusion center? Who selects these contractors and determines their suitability for access to sensitive law enforcement information? Who conducts the background investigations to determine if the contractors are suitable for giving access to sensitive law enforcement information collected at fusion centers? Is there a review to ensure there are no conflicts of interest with the contractor's participation in the fusion center? Are they paid with State or Federal funds?

III. Funding

- a) Please provide the fusion center's budget.
- b) Please detail the federal grants received by the fusion center, explain how these funds were used, and any documentation required to satisfy the grant requirements.
- c) Please detail all state funding to the fusion center.
- d) Please detail any private sector grants, loans, or payments to the fusion center.
- e) Please detail any in-kind contributions to the fusion center, including personnel, access to systems, analytical tools, or data sets.

IV. Mission and Metrics of Success

- a) Please define the fusion center's mission, and any performance review or
- b) assessment to determine whether the fusion center is meeting its goals and complying with all federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies.
- c) What metrics has the fusion center developed to measure its performance?
 - i. How do fusion center personnel test the accuracy of information received at the fusion center?
 - ii. How do fusion center personnel determine the accuracy of information disseminated by fusion center personnel?
 - iii. If information received or disseminated by the fusion center is later determined to be false or collected in error, how is the data purged from the system(s) and withdrawn or corrected within the fusion center network?
- d) Please provide any reports of evaluation, audit, or assessment of the fusion center conducted by any entity for the past 10 years.

V. Systems

- a) Identify all federal intelligence and information sharing systems and data sets fusion center personnel have access to. For each:
 - i. Identify the laws, regulation, and policies governing its use.
 - ii. Identify the fusion center personnel (by title or position) that have access to these systems and data sets.
 - iii. Identify the fusion center official(s) responsible for ensuring access by fusion center personnel complies with these laws, regulations, and policies.
- b) Identify all state and local government intelligence and information sharing systems and data sets that fusion center personnel have access to. For each:
 - i. Identify the laws, regulation, and policies governing its use.
 - ii. Identify the fusion center personnel (by title or position) that have access to these systems and data sets.
 - iii. Identify the fusion center official(s) responsible for ensuring access by fusion center personnel complies with these laws, regulations, and policies.
- c) Identify all commercial or proprietary data sets, information sharing systems, and analytical tools the fusion center personnel have access to that are owned or controlled by non-government private entities or contractors. For each:
 - i. Identify the laws, regulation, and policies governing its use.

- ii. Identify the fusion center personnel (by title or position) that have access to these systems and data sets.
- iii. Identify the fusion center official(s) responsible for ensuring access by fusion center personnel complies with all appropriate laws, regulations, and policies governing their use.
- iv. Where access or use of these systems, applications, and products is purchased, provide all invoices and purchase orders.

VI. Training

- a) Provide all training records for fusion center personnel.
- b) What entity is responsible for training fusion center participants? Who conducts this training? Who pays for the training? Who ensures the training meets all appropriate standards?

VII. Information and data security

- a) Fusion centers have access to extremely sensitive information, including criminal intelligence information, federal counterterrorism intelligence, and personally identifiable information about criminal subjects, victims, and witnesses, as well as individuals engaged in First Amendment-protected activities. How is this information secured from breaches, accidental releases, intentional leaks by insiders? How does the fusion center ensure the information isn't misused by fusion center personnel for personal gain?
- b) Provide any information regarding previous breaches, leaks, or misuse of fusion center data, the nature of the information that was compromised, and how the vulnerability was mitigated.
- c) How many individuals' personal information was compromised during these breaches, and how were they notified and compensated?

I. Management and Oversight

- a) What state or local officials are responsible for overseeing fusion center activities and ensuring their activities comply with all laws, regulations, and policies?
- b) What elected officials have access to the fusion center?

The lack of sufficient public and legislative oversight over fusion centers in California is inexcusable and must end. Fusion center surveillance and targeting activities have grown excessively, and I will not stand by while this system continues to mine our personal information—who we are, where we go, what we do, and who we know—without improved transparency.

Thank you for your consideration of this audit request. If you have any questions or concerns about this audit request, please contact my Policy Analyst, Dulce Ramirez at (916) 651-4031 or Dulce.Ramirez@sen.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



SABRINA CERVANTES
Senator, 31st District

cc: Members of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee