



BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

Committee on Public Safety and Criminal Justice
Henry A. Santana, Chair

One City Hall Square 5th Floor, Boston, MA 02201 ♦ Phone: (617) 635-3040 ♦ city.council@boston.gov

REPORT OF COMMITTEE CHAIR

August 25, 2025

Dear Councilors,

The Committee on Public Safety and Criminal Justice was referred the following docket for consideration:

Docket #1357 Message and order in accordance with the Ordinance on Surveillance Oversight and Information Sharing, Boston City Code Section 16-63.3(b)(3), I hereby transmit for your review the Boston Police Department's report on three "Social Media Analysis Tools", the Surveillance Use Policy, questionnaire, and the relevant Department policies that govern the use of these tools.

This matter was sponsored by the Administration and was referred to the Committee on July 7, 2025.

Summary of Legislation

Docket #1357 is a communication from Boston Police Commissioner Michael Cox submitting Surveillance Use Policies based on the Boston Police Department's use of three social media analysis tools, "Sourcefeed" "Chorus" and "Tangles". The Council must vote to approve or deny the policy within 60 days of submission by simple majority. If not approved, the policy is referred to the Surveillance Oversight Advisory Board for recommendations to the Mayor, who may choose to submit a revised policy to the Council for reconsideration.

A Surveillance Use Policy must clearly outline the purpose of the technology, authorized and prohibited uses, types of data collected, who can access the data, and safeguards for data protection, retention, and deletion. It must also address public and inter-agency data sharing, required training, oversight and compliance mechanisms, relevant legal authorities, and specific considerations for data involving minors. Along with the submission of a Surveillance Use Policy for each of the social media analysis tools, Commissioner Cox submitted a Surveillance Technology Impact Report that included information about each technology, how they work, their intended purpose, and the type of surveillance and data they collect.

In May 2023, the Boston Police Department (BPD) accessed the "*Sourcefeed and Searchfeed*" databases on a trial basis, citing exigent circumstances. They stated that these databases are used by a limited team in BRIC's Counterterrorism and Threat Assessment Section under supervisory and legal oversight to detect and review online threats. The tools have provided context, leads, and translation capabilities in counterterrorism investigations, filtered international content relevant to Boston and New England, and helped the Department adjust security measures. BPD utilizes these tools to improve efficiency and increase analytical accuracy when reviewing large datasets.

In early October 2024, BPD utilized the *Chorus Intelligence Suite* (CIS) citing exigent circumstances for approximately 30 days. The Commissioner stated that in the weeks leading up to the November 2024 National Elections, heightened threats nationally and locally necessitated the urgent use of this tool. BPD believed that the volume of online content related to election events would exceed existing personnel



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resources, requiring efficient review of threat information that could affect the Boston Metro Area. Since February 2025, the Department has maintained access to CIS, restricted to a small group of personnel in BRIC under supervisor oversight and legal guidance. The suite gathers and analyzes data from publicly available sources, enabling analysts to locate open-source social media profiles using a name, phone number, or social media handle.

Beginning in October 2024, the Department also utilized *Tangles*, citing exigent circumstances for approximately 30 days. The tool was used by a small group of BRIC personnel under supervisor oversight and legal guidance to support investigations involving individuals in ongoing criminal cases. *Tangles* enabled analysts to locate open-source social media profiles using a person's name, phone number, or social media handle. BPD stated that they are no longer accessing this tool.

Through the use of "*SourceFeed*" and "*CIS*", BPD stated they protect information through strict access controls, confidentiality rules, and oversight mechanisms. Personnel must follow password and log-in procedures, maintain confidentiality, and only disclose information when lawfully required. Unauthorized access or disclosure is prohibited and may result in disciplinary or criminal penalties. All requests for information must be verified to ensure lawful release, and personnel are responsible for preventing third-party access. Use of social media analysis tools and databases is closely monitored through audits, supervisor review, and monthly oversight by the BRIC Privacy Committee.

Data retention follows the Massachusetts Statewide Records Retention Schedule, BPD Rule 322A, and BRIC's Privacy Policy. Information is reviewed regularly, with BRIC conducting quarterly validations and a full review at least every five years. Records connected to criminal cases must be preserved through trial and appeals for discovery purposes. Public access to information is managed under Massachusetts public records law, with media requests handled by the BPD Media Relations Office and criminal defendants gaining access through discovery rules, subpoenas, or court orders.

Information sharing with other agencies is limited to circumstances permitted by law, BPD rules, and the Boston Trust Act. Requests from outside law enforcement agencies follow strict procedures and oversight. Authorized users receive comprehensive training before access.

Information Received at Hearings

The Committee held two hearings, on Tuesday, August 12, 2025, and Tuesday, August 19, 2025. At the hearings, the Administration was represented by Boston Police Department (BPD) Deputy Superintendent Gerald Cahill; and Ryan Walsh, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Analysis at the Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC). Community panels included representatives from the Technology for Liberty Program at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Digital Fourth, and the Muslim Justice League.

Ryan Walsh, Director of BRIC, outlined the Department's mission as the region's intelligence hub, emphasizing its role in collecting and sharing information. He explained that BRIC uses analytic tools to process open-source data, particularly from social media, which has become a growing source of threats. He stated that over the past four years, BRIC reviewed more than 200 threats annually, with one-third of 2025 reports involving social media. Walsh stressed the importance of advanced technology, citing cases



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where these tools aided in counterterrorism, human trafficking, sexual assault, fugitive tracking, and missing persons cases.

Director Walsh described the BRIC's exigent use of three social media analysis tools beginning in October 2024 amid heightened threats during the national election. Two applications—Chorus Intelligence and Site Intelligence's Sourcefeed/Searchfeed—were identified as most effective. Walsh acknowledged delays in notifying the Council as required under the Surveillance Ordinance and apologized, pledging to improve future compliance. Committee members raised concerns about privacy, immigration-related information sharing, and potential overreach under exigent circumstances. Officials clarified that the tools rely on publicly available data, are primarily used for counterterrorism (95% for Sourcefeed/Searchfeed; 35% for Chorus), and do not employ artificial intelligence.

Community panelists questioned BPD's reliance on "exigent circumstances" to deploy surveillance without Council approval, arguing it violates the Ordinance and risks becoming indefinite. They warned that social media monitoring threatens constitutional rights and may be misinterpreted due to lack of cultural competency. Panelists urged clarifying exigent-use limits, tightening reporting requirements, and granting Council revocation authority. They raised concerns about BPD bypassing the City Council for approval, particularly given patterns of bias affecting the Muslim community. Councilors asked the panelists questions regarding the implications of BPD's use of social media monitoring products. They cautioned against the implicit bias these programs may carry against certain racial and political groups.

The Committee discussed concerns that delayed reporting and unclear application of exigent circumstances could erode public trust. Discussion highlighted the need to clarify or amend the exigent circumstances provision to prevent indefinite use, and questions were raised about the proportion of tool use for counterterrorism versus traditional criminal activity. Public testimony was heard addressing concerns regarding privacy, overreach and data sharing.

Committee Chair Recommended Action

Docket #1357 addresses sensitive and complex issues regarding the Boston Police Department's use of social media analysis tools. Testimony made clear that these tools have supported urgent public safety needs, particularly during periods of heightened threat, such as national election security. At the same time, valid concerns have been raised about timeliness of Council notification, the use of "exigent circumstances" to justify deployments, and the need for clear limits on surveillance authority. Community advocates have emphasized risks to privacy, civil liberties, and the potential for bias. Despite these concerns, the Surveillance Use Policies, oversight mechanisms, and commitments to improve reporting provide a pathway to maintain safety while reinforcing accountability. Approving this docket allows for continued Council oversight and provides an opportunity to refine the Ordinance to address exigent-use provisions more explicitly in the future. As Chair of the Committee on Public Safety and Criminal Justice I recommend moving the listed docket from the Committee to the full Council for discussion and formal action. At this time, my recommendation to the full Council will be that this matter **OUGHT TO PASS**.

Henry A. Santana

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