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John Wargo: A federal policy that endangers our state's cybersecurity

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In recent years, cybercriminals have disrupted Pennsylvania's state court systems, crippled the 911 dispatch system in Bucks County, and exposed the personal data of millions of schoolchildren. These attacks do not just threaten data — they threaten the services our communities rely on every day.



We have a powerful line of defense. For more than 20 years, a national initiative called the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center (MS-ISAC) has been providing critical



cybersecurity services to state and local governments, including public schools, at no cost.



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But now, this vital program is at risk.

The only safety net

The federal government eliminated funding for cybersecurity services MS-ISAC provides. Without this funding, the only safety net available to thousands of local governments could disappear, leaving our schools, hospitals, and public utilities dangerously exposed.

The consequences of losing it are not hypothetical. Here is one example of how the MS-ISAC has worked with public agencies to thwart an attack it could not have stopped without help.

Earlier this year, a cybercriminal based in Massachusetts hacked PowerSchool, an education system used by districts in central Pennsylvania and across the country. The hack led to the data theft of up to 60 million students and 10 million teachers. It also shut down the entire network for a school district in Michigan.

As soon as that school system alerted the MS-ISAC, a team of experts investigated the breach. Using advanced analysis, the team identified the type of ransomware used and confirmed that the hacker did not steal the school system's data. They also discovered that the system's server had an outdated operating system, which likely allowed the attack.

The team provided the school district the expert forensic analysis and technical knowledge they needed — and crucially, as a single school system, did not have — to contain and eradicate the threat. They also provided recommendations to help strengthen its cybersecurity protocols and prevent similar breaches in the future.

Prime targets

Without the expertise and rapid response, the school district could have faced far greater damage. That could include not just lost data, but missed school days, cancelled exams, loss of access to cyber and afterschool programs, the closure of food services and other facilities that members of the community rely upon, and even higher taxes to recover the funds lost to ransomware.

School districts are prime targets because they are treasure troves of private, personal information on children as young as four years old. It could be a decade or more before these children learn their identities have been stolen, with many not finding out until they apply to college or try to buy a car.

In my 35 years serving Pennsylvania's public school community, I have never seen a greater need for the services the MS-ISAC provides. In just the last 18 months, more than 2,100 cyberattacks targeted schools in Pennsylvania, making up 62% of all major incidents detected by the MS-ISAC statewide.

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After the administration announced it would cut MS-ISAC funding, the nonprofit Center for Internet Security — which operates the MS-ISAC — stepped in to cover the costs temporarily. But that stopgap funding, which costs over \$1 million per month, is set to run out on September 30. Without federal support, the MS-ISAC will be forced to scale back or shut down critical services.

A national security issue

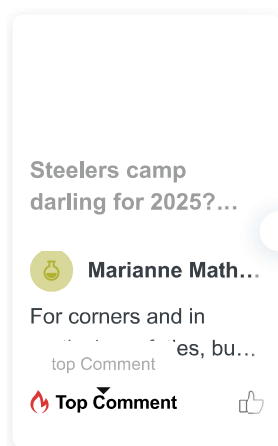
This is not just a cybersecurity issue. It is a national security issue. If we allow the MS-ISAC to falter, we are effectively telling cybercriminals that our public institutions are open targets. We are leaving our data, our emergency systems, and our communities vulnerable.

Congress and the administration must act now to restore and sustain funding for the MS-ISAC. The cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of prevention. Let's not wait for the next major breach to realize what we have lost.

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