

Vt. ponders more monitoring of worker web surfing

April 29 2010, By DAVE GRAM , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A move by state agencies to crack down on inappropriate Web surfing by state employees has erupted in the Statehouse as a debate over workplace privacy rights.

The issue is coming to a head in the nation's smallest state capital just a week after it was revealed that senior employees at the Washington headquarters of the federal [Securities and Exchange Commission](#) spent hours at work viewing pornographic websites instead of policing the U.S. financial system as it teetered on the brink of collapse.

But the idea that managers in Vermont state government should be able to track the Web habits of public employees did not sit well with part-time county prosecutor Vincent Illuzzi.

"I'm going to turn in my (state-issued) laptop," said Illuzzi, who aside from serving as the state's attorney of Essex County is a state senator.

It was in his latter capacity that Illuzzi, a Republican, introduced an amendment to a budget bill this week barring government agency managers from using powerful new software to monitor employee [Internet usage](#). The Senate passed it on a unanimous voice vote; it now goes to the House.

"You have to trust your employees," Illuzzi said. "You can't assume that every employee is engaging in misconduct and therefore needs to be monitored at all times."

State officials insisted in interviews Thursday that lawmakers are overreacting to an expansion of a practice that has been in place for years. Gov. Jim Douglas defended it as his weekly news conference.

"I think Vermonters understand that we've got taxpayer-funded employees using taxpayer-funded equipment doing the taxpayers' business," Douglas said. "The state has some right and responsibility to ensure that they're being used for appropriate purposes."

Human Resources Commissioner Caroline Earle said the state does not plan constant monitoring of employees, but wants a way to check up when it has indications workers may be distracted by the Internet from getting their work done.

"This isn't anything new; it's a continuation of something we've already had in place on a more limited basis," Earle said. She added that as the software, which is costing the state \$120,000, is being added in each agency, employees are being given ample warning that their Internet searches are subject to review.

"The most significant impact of this system has been the deterrent effect," she said.

Earle said employees were allowed personal use of the Internet on work computers during breaks, but some sites - pornography, gambling, fantasy sports and weapons-related sites among them - are blocked.

Jes Kraus, director of the Vermont State Employees Association union, said he worries about workers running online errands they assume to be private on their lunch breaks, only to have a manager find out about them. A worker newly diagnosed with HIV-AIDS might have reason to research that topic on the Internet but not want a manager to know, he said.

National experts say monitoring of employees' online habits in the [workplace](#) is common.

Tina Chiappetta, senior director of government affairs at the Virginia-based International Public Management Association for Human Resources, said her group has done no research to determine what percentage of public agencies use such monitoring.

"I would assume that it's sort of general practice," she said.

Paul Stephens, director of policy and advocacy for the San Diego-based [Privacy](#) Rights Clearinghouse, said his group opposes such monitoring, "but the reality is most employers do it. The key thing is that [employees](#) have informed consent" - notice that such monitoring or the possibility of it is a condition of employment.

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