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Warrant checks at Ulster County Social Services office called misguided, discriminatory

New policy at Social Services office is called misguided, discriminatory

By Patricia Doxsey, Daily Freeman

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KINGSTON >> The New York Civil Liberties Union and National Center for Law and Economic Justice have called on Ulster County Sheriff Paul Van Blarcum to stop running warrant checks on visitors to the county Department of Social Services, calling the practice “misguided and unlawful.”

In a three-page letter dated Thursday, the two agencies said the policy violates Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure, is discriminatory and could have a chilling effect on those seeking to access state and federal programs.

“This policy turns every casual visit to DSS to access those benefits or to ask a question into a police encounter, and every visitor into a potential criminal,” the letter states.

According to the letter, which also was sent to Ulster County Executive Michael Hein and county Social Services Commissioner Michael Iapoce, the two groups have received complaints about the new procedures from people visiting the Social Services office in the town of Ulster.

Under procedures implemented earlier this month, everyone who enters the office — not just Social Services clients — must present identification with a name and date of birth at the security checkpoint. Sheriff’s deputies, who provide security coverage at the office, enter that information into the New York Statewide Police Information Network, which informs deputies whether the person has any outstanding warrants.

Van Blarcum said the procedures also are in place in the Ulster County Jail and the county Probation Department.

In addition to raising concerns among civil rights advocates and county leaders, the new policy is under scrutiny by the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, which oversees the programs administered by the Ulster County Department of Social Services.

Hein has called on the county Legislature to consider a countywide policy governing security in county buildings, and members of the Legislature’s Public Health and Social Services Committee expect to take up the matter at a meeting on Monday.

“This policy is wholly inconsistent with the mission of the DSS, which is to help people. The whole point of the office, the whole structure of the law is to help people in need,” said Mariko Hirose, a staff attorney with the New York Civil Liberties Union. “This policy only serves to deter people, confuse people and make

people unwelcome.

“We’re really hoping that the county will reconsider and rescind this policy. That’s the point of our letter,” Hirose said.

Van Blarcum could not be reached for comment Thursday. He previously has defended the warrant check policy, saying it is no different than his patrol deputies using license plate readers and can help his office and other law-enforcement agencies clear backlogs of outstanding warrants.

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