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April 4, 2013

District Attorney C. Samuel Sutter  
P.O. Box 973  
888 Purchase Street  
New Bedford, MA 02741

Dear District Attorney Sutter,

This is a public records request for various records relating to administrative subpoenas.

In 2008, the provisions of G.L. c. 271, § 17B were amended to expand substantially the power of Massachusetts prosecutors to obtain information about private communications. Enacted as part of legislation addressed to preventing sexual abuse of children, St. 2008, § 205, and described by the attorney general as a tool to track online predators, the amendment of § 17B nevertheless went much further. As amended, the law allows the attorney general or a district attorney to issue an administrative subpoena for the records of certain communications service providers concerning private communications if the prosecutor has “reasonable grounds to believe that [such records] are relevant and material to an ongoing criminal investigation.” The recipient of such a subpoena is required to deliver the records to the attorney general or the district attorney within 14 days. Although the statute expressly prohibits the disclosure of the content of electronic communication, the records which may be obtained under the statute are capable of revealing significant amounts of information about the activities and communications of Massachusetts residents.

In order to permit the public to understand how this authority has been used, the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts (“ACLU”) is

making this request under the Massachusetts public records law, G.L. c. 66, § 10, for the following records:

1. Any written description of the procedure for approval of the issuance of an administrative subpoena pursuant to the provisions of § 17B;
2. A sample of the form of a § 17B administrative subpoena used by the District Attorney for Bristol County;
3. Records showing the number of § 17B administrative subpoenas issued by the District Attorney for Bristol County in each year for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013;
4. Records showing the particular offenses or category of offenses which were the subject of “ongoing criminal investigations” justifying the issuance of a § 17B administrative subpoena in each year for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013 and the number of such subpoenas issued for each offense or category of offense;
5. Records showing whether in any case the recipient of a § 17B administrative subpoena was requested not to disclose, whether to the subject of the records or to anyone else, that a subpoena for his records had been received;
6. Records showing whether notice of any § 17B administrative subpoena was provided to the person or entity who is the subject of the records;
7. Records showing the names of the common carriers or services providers to whom a § 17B administrative subpoenas was issued by the District Attorney for Bristol County and the number of such subpoenas issued to each in each year for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013;
8. Any motions to quash a § 17B subpoena which have been filed since January 2011; and
9. Records showing the name and court docket number of any case in which a motion to suppress evidence obtained as a result of a § 17B subpoena has been filed.

The purpose of this request is to obtain information about how extensively and under what circumstances your office has used the authority conferred by the 2008 amendment. As information about the scope of use of § 17B is not currently available to the public, we have no means of knowing whether literal compliance with this request requires review and disclosure of a substantial number of records. If that is the case, we would certainly be willing to discuss an appropriate modification of the request consistent with disclosure of the information we are seeking.

Please provide records in electronic form wherever possible. Because this request involves a matter of public concern and because it is made on behalf of a nonprofit organization, we ask that you waive any copying costs pursuant to 950 C.M.R. § 32.06(5). ACLUM is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the protection of civil rights and liberties for all persons in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

If you decide not to waive copying costs, we request that you permit us to examine, at our election, the responsive documents before deciding which portions to photocopy.

Should you determine that some portion of the documents requested are exempt from disclosure, we ask you to release any reasonably segregable portions that are not exempt. In addition, please note the applicable statutory exemption and explain why it applies to the redacted portions.

Thank you for your assistance. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Kade Crockford  
ACLU of Massachusetts