

# Self Storage Is Part of Today's Security-Threat Landscape

*The SSA is serving as a vital communication link between facility operators and homeland security officials.*

By Mark Wright

You're making the rounds of your facility when suddenly you stop in front of a unit. You smell something, an unusual odor you can't quite put your finger on. It's just strong enough to get your attention, and only because you happened to be very close to the door as you walked past. "What the heck could that be?" you ask yourself.

You make a note of the unit number and continue on your way. Back in the office a few minutes later, you wonder if you should call someone, but you're worried about looking stupid or alarmist if it turns out to be nothing.

So, you run through the possibilities first—silently: Was it some kind of fuel? No, it didn't smell like that. Hmm. You fish out the records for that unit to identify the tenant, but they're not much help: Just a guy who claimed to need some extra space while his home's garage was being remodeled.

The odor you smelled could turn out to be benign. Or, it could be evidence of a substance that might blow your facility sky high. What do you do? Who do you call? And how quickly should you react?

## A New Era of Watchfulness

Bob Dylan's 1963 song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," seems oh-so-relevant today—albeit in unexpected ways. To go to work and wonder whether you'll be an unwitting player in a dangerous plot targeting Americans, or discover a methamphetamine lab bubbling away in one of your units, is not the sort of job you likely contemplated when you got into the self storage business.

It's a new era, and like most new eras, the ability to adapt is paramount to survival. Adapting to today's threat-filled environment begins with acknowledging those threats. Yes, they're real.

The unthinkable happens. Americans' innocence and denial collapsed along with the buildings that were struck and the lives that were lost on 9/11.

Is self storage on the must-have list of essential assets required by every terrorist sleeper cell or drug lord in the nation? Of course not. But for some it is. So, prudence demands watchfulness.

**"The most effective security approach is to build it into the fabric of a company's culture."**

*Peter Beerling  
Security for the Self Storage Industry*

And *watching* is exactly what the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—and the Self Storage Association, for that matter—is encouraging every SSA member to do. It's the first and simplest level of defense against potential threats.

"The big element in preparedness is educating the manager to spot suspicious behavior," notes SSA president and CEO Michael Scanlon. "We want to make sure we're doing everything we can as an industry to inform and educate our members so none of us becomes an unwitting enabler of terrorists or homegrown nuts."

Scanlon participates on SSA's behalf in a subgroup organized by DHS to update selected business and industry sectors on current security issues and threats, both manmade and natural. The subgroup in which SSA participates meets twice a year. A DHS spokesperson describes the process as a voluntary, two-way partnership that exists to be mutually beneficial for both the private sector and DHS.

SSA has posted important information obtained from its collaboration with DHS in the members-only section of [self-storage.org](http://self-storage.org). (Access is restricted to members at DHS's request as a security precaution.)

### Onsite Staff Key to Security

To avoid the "enabling" that Scanlon warns of, storage facility employees need to ask questions, notes Peter Beering, security expert, consultant and speaker—and author of the SSA publication, *Security for the Self Storage Industry*. Probably the most valuable security asset a facility can have, says Beering, is "the alert employee who follows the program, asks questions and notifies people about things that don't look right. The entire system relies heavily on a well-trained counter person who says, 'This person is way too nervous. He or she is just behaving weird. I really need to let somebody know, even if it's just telling my boss.'"

"You have to build security in as part of the daily operation," counsels Beering. The recommendations outlined in the *Security for the Self Storage Industry* manual are intended to compliment existing facility management practices, he says. "The most effective security approach is to build it into the fabric of a company's culture."

Few know this reality better than people like Jordon Garrand, the Guardian Self Storage facility co-manager

in New Windsor, New York, profiled in the October 2009 issue of the *SSA Globe*. Garrand's story shows how important it is to speak up when something about a tenant—or group of tenants—seems troubling.

"It showed the benefits of being observant, analyzing the activity and being willing to communicate," observes New York Self Storage Association president Chris McGrath. McGrath had long ago developed a "Know Your Customer" booklet for NYSSA members emphasizing the importance of preparation and watchfulness. It details six simple steps, all to be initiated from the facility's counter, that guide the vetting of potential tenants. The SSA's Spotlight on Security program grew out of McGrath's work. (Click on "Self Storage Security" from the "Resources" menu at [self-storage.org](http://self-storage.org) for a free PDF copy.)



### Technology Can Also Help

As central as the role of facility staff is in identifying problem tenants, no one is foolproof. Intuition by definition is inexact. That's why some storage operators have opted to give their security systems a high-tech boost, going beyond the basics of keypads and video cameras.

Christopher Barry, partner with Barrington, Illinois-based LifeStorage Centers, and Marvin Chaney, founder, developer and owner of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida-based RoboVault, both chose threat detection systems from Norwalk, Connecticut-based Defentect ([www.defentect.com](http://www.defentect.com)).

The goal: Achieve early warning of terrorist efforts to build dirty bombs or other chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive (CBRNE) threats. Barry and Chaney, respectively, wanted a solution that would integrate well with their existing computer-based security systems.

Without this technology, explains Barry, "we can only see what the eye can see. This gives us a level of detection that the customer wouldn't necessarily know we possess. We can find out if they're bringing in a volatile organic compound or other substances. You have to be more careful these days. We do a fairly thorough job of understanding what's going on at our properties."

Chaney is highly attuned to the post-9/11 security landscape, in part because of his facility's location—situated very near Port Everglades (where more than 5,300 ships

*See Security-Threat Landscape, page 15*

call annually) and virtually across the street from the busy Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Chaney says he's "more concerned than I've ever been" about the possibility of someone transporting something harmful.

He thought his facility was tight as a drum, though. After all, it was built to withstand a category-5 hurricane, and the all-robotic storage system made theft of stored items unlikely. His fire suppression system was great, too.

Then he encountered a bucket of cold water in the form of an insurance rep who asked, "What are you doing about chemical storage? What if somebody stored material for a meth lab or nuclear device?"



*LifeStorage in Libertyville, Illinois, is one example of a storage facility implementing new technology.*

That's when he "got lucky and ran across Defentect," Chaney says. "Insurance companies have a right to be concerned. What can we do to mitigate risk?"

### Are You Shaking Yet?

The more you wonder about this stuff, the easier it is to, well, freak out. That might be an understandable reaction, but it's not a helpful response. Over-reacting just shuts us down and/or makes us too suspicious.

As Beering notes, "Fear is nature's way of heightening our sensibilities to various risks. Most of us have a reasonable ability to assess risks. The thing to remember is, the vast majority of customers are at your facility for legitimate reasons. Often as not, standard operating procedures will ferret these things out. They're best practices, they're tried and true, and there's not a lot of magic to them. More than anything, it's just a matter of making sure people are actually following them."

Perhaps one of the best ways to dial down your anxiety level: Develop relationships with local law enforcement

*See Security-Threat Landscape, page 17*

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## **Security for the Self Storage Industry** **What Every Self Storage Owner/Operator** **and Manager Needs to Know**

This SSA publication was developed to give the owner, operator, or staff member of a self storage facility the tools to understand the various components of security.

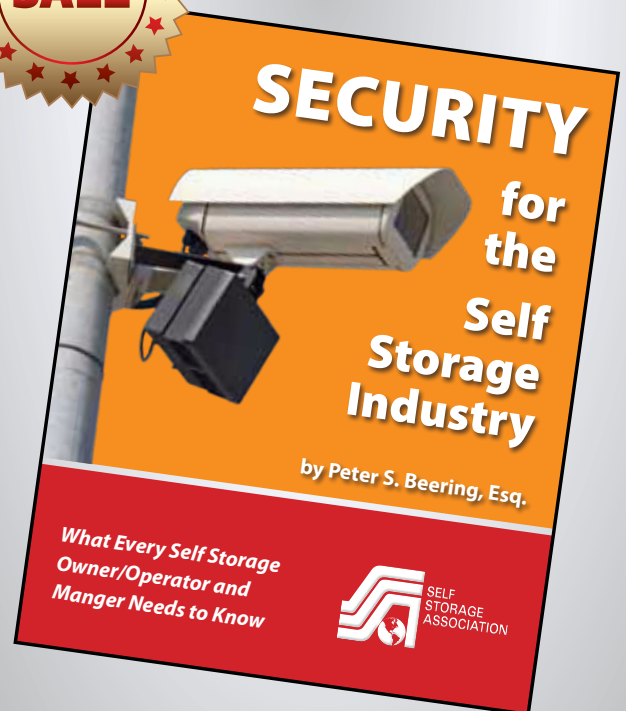
Some of the valuable topics discussed include terrorism, criminal behaviors, theft schemes and the manufacture, trafficking and sale of illegal drugs. There are also a variety of tools included that make your security planning easy, such as assessment checklists, procedural lists, how and where to find out information on hazardous materials, how public officials will manage an incident, and federal law enforcement contact information. These areas of security affect the self storage industry every day.

Don't get caught without the knowledge you need to protect yourself, your employees and your investment.

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authorities—now, before you face a situation like the fictional sniff-test scenario we opened with.

As a DHS spokesperson who knows SSA well explains, facilities should “establish trusted partnership relationships on a local level. When all is said and done, the locals will be taking most of the action when something happens. Call them. Tell them who you are. Explain that you’d like to establish a relationship with them because of self storage’s potential for—and actual role in—drug- and terrorism-related activities so you can share information

quickly. And continue to nurture that relationship. When something happens, you want to already have established those relationships so that law enforcement can advise you quickly and respond appropriately.”

During World War II, Uncle Sam used to warn that “loose lips sink ships.” Today, however, America needs this industry’s watchful eyes to be on the lookout for people who want to sink our nation’s way of life and replace our freedom with fear. SSA will continue to make the latest information it receives through DHS available to members—whose keen senses serve as a vital part of America’s day-to-day front line of defense. ❖

## Potential Indicators of Suspicious Use of Storage Facilities

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) noted in an announcement distributed by the SSA to all members on September 22, 2009: “Evidence from police investigations, foiled plots, and past terrorist attacks reveals terrorists have used commercial storage facilities, including self-storage units, to store explosives or other supplies prior to attacks. These facilities afford flexibility and some degree of cover to terrorists engaged in preoperational activities, and can be used to hide explosives and other materials with limited risk of arousing suspicion. With good operational security, terrorists can circumvent restrictions on the types of materials allowed in facilities.” The notice includes a recommendation from DHS and the FBI “that law enforcement establish contact with storage facilities to encourage self-storage facility employees, operators, and owners use systematic procedures for detecting and reporting signs of suspicious behavior.”

Examples of suspicious behavior or other signs of potential terrorist activity are highlighted below. While not all seemingly suspicious activities are actionable, when combined with other derogatory information they could indicate a threat:

- Insistence on paying in cash, sometimes weeks or months in advance

- Seemingly excessive concern about privacy
- Visits to a storage unit late at night or at unusual times
- Suspicious deliveries to the storage unit, particularly from chemical supply companies
- Exhibiting nervousness or evasiveness when approached by rental employees or security personnel
- Unusual fumes, liquids, residues, or odors emanating from units
- Discarding of chemical containers in storage unit dumpsters
- Stockpiling of cell phones, timers or similar electronic devices
- Indications of burns or symptoms of exposure to chemical substances
- Attempts to store unusual quantities of fuel, or agricultural/industrial chemicals
- Attempts to store agricultural equipment, such as commercial sprayers
- Attempts to store blasting caps, explosives, or fuses