



CITY OF RENSSELAER

RENSSELAER, INDIANA

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City of Rensselaer Kicks Off Cybersecurity Effort to Protect its Water Systems

Amid ongoing cyber-attacks against water utilities across the nation, Rensselaer leverages innovative program to bring in top cyber talent at NO COST to ratepayers

Rensselaer, IN (February 24, 2025) – Rensselaer is one of the first water utilities in the nation to participate in a new cyber security initiative, which seeks to defend critical water and wastewater systems against cyber-attacks. The city has joined “Project *Franklin*,” a collaboration between University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy’s Cyber Policy Initiative (CPI), DEF CON (the world’s largest summit of technologists), and the National Rural Water Association (NRWA). *Franklin* pairs cybersecurity experts with water utilities and will also distill best practices in cyber security for future use by the department. This partnership gives the City of Rensselaer access to free support that will help bolster cybersecurity and defend the utility against malicious cyber-attacks. Bryce Black, Superintendent for Streets, Sanitation, Water & Sewage for the City of Rensselaer believes that this help comes at a crucial time for public utilities.

“The City of Rensselaer recognizes there is not one “silver bullet” when it comes to cybersecurity,” said Black. “We also recognize the importance of not underestimating cyber risks & are excited to partner with The University of Chicago to improve on our cybersecurity. The evolving regulatory environment comes with more stringent security & risk management practices. We are confident that this program will provide us with the necessary best management practices against potential cyber threats.”

In 2024, the EPA warned nationwide water utilities of the increasing risk, and frequency, of cyberattacks on water systems. U.S. officials have specifically called out a Chinese-linked cyber threat known as Volt Typhoon, which continues to compromise information technology across the American critical infrastructure network. Experts believe that Volt Typhoon is an adversarial strategy to pre-position on U.S. and allied IT infrastructure, in anticipation of launching cyberattacks in the event of conflict over Taiwan or another critical geopolitical issue.

Said Jake Braun, CPI Executive Director and former White House acting Principal National Cyber Director: “At the White House, we spent an enormous amount of time trying to devise ways to better secure our water systems in light of China's Volt Typhoon attacks. However, most of our time was spent on the water utilities supporting military installations. There are another 49,000 water utilities that do not support military bases and still need help with their cybersecurity because they either don’t have the staff, or the resources, to protect themselves.”

Franklin identifies and connects cyber experts with water utilities as a free, scalable solution to help secure water systems nationwide. The program gets its name from Benjamin Franklin who, among many other achievements, co-founded the first volunteer fire department in America.

“The water sector faces increasing cybersecurity-related risk,” said NRWA Chief Executive Officer Matt Holmes. “Over 91% of the approximately 50,000 community water systems in the United States are small, serving fewer than 10,000 people. NRWA and our members are at the forefront of this challenge. This partnership brings cybersecurity experts to rural America to provide the tools our sector needs to assess, prepare, and respond to cyberattacks.”

“DEF CON’s superpower is that we’re a bunch of technologists that want to help, figure out how things work, or love pointing out how things are broken and might be fixed. It turns out, there are a lot of groups that want to hear that perspective - and would like advice and help,” said Jeff Moss, founder of DEF CON.



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The Cyber Policy Initiative (CPI) is a forum through which government officials, academics, and cybersecurity professionals can engage and strengthen cyber posture against malicious actors and attacks. Through partnerships with DEF CON and domestic and foreign governments, CPI targets several objectives, including publishing a yearly "Hackers' Almanack" to promote cutting-edge cybersecurity policy interventions; establishing a cyber volunteer task force to help secure critical infrastructure, starting with U.S. water utilities and school districts; and helping state and local governments develop cybersecurity strategies, implement recommendations, and craft workforce development plans. CPI is supported through a generous grant from Craig Newmark and Craig Newmark philanthropies.

The National Rural Water Association (NRWA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to training, supporting, and promoting the water and wastewater professionals that serve small and rural communities across the country. NRWA provides nationwide training and technical assistance through its affiliated State Rural Water Associations that currently have over 31,000 utility system members across all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Rural Water training and technical assistance covers every aspect of operating, managing, and financing water and wastewater utilities. DEF CON is one of the oldest continuously running hacker conventions around, and also one of the largest.

