

FBI BLASTED FOR CUTS IN CRIME FIGHTING - DEMOCRATS EXPRESS OUTRAGE OVER TRANSFER OF AGENTS TO TERRORISM FOCUS

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Leading Democrats in Congress blasted the Bush administration Wednesday for raiding the FBI's criminal program in the wake of 9/11 - authorizing huge staffing cuts there that caused thousands of cases to fall through cracks nationwide.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., expressed outrage over the wholesale transfer of FBI agents to counterterrorism operations without any plan in place to pick up the slack.

"Americans expect us to do both - both fighting terrorism and the domestic criminal priorities that have always been the mission of the FBI," Murray said. "We can't expect them to do it with no increase in resources, and that's what the Bush administration has done.

"Their budgets haven't increased to take on the new mission of terrorism while continuing to do criminal work at the same level."

Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., agreed, saying the FBI "cannot abandon its traditional crime-fighting obligations."

The FBI's ability to investigate a number of crimes, ranging from fraud to hate crimes, has been strained by a continuing shift of agents to duties aimed at preventing another terrorist attack on American soil, the Seattle P-I reported Wednesday.

There have been sharp drops in the number of traditional criminal cases being brought to federal prosecutors across the country, according to a P-I analysis of more than a quarter-million criminal cases. White-collar and civil rights investigations showed some of the biggest declines since 2000.

The story detailed how the administration responded to 9/11 by shifting more than 2,400 criminal agents to counterterrorism without backfilling criminal squads. Successive attorneys general - John Ashcroft and Alberto Gonzales - rejected FBI appeals for more agents.

Biden, a Senate Judiciary Committee member, has introduced legislation to hire 1,000 FBI agents for criminal programs and to restore federal aid to local and state law enforcement agencies. Biden was unable to win passage of the bill in the previous Republican-led Congress.

Murray said Wednesday that she will support Biden's legislation. "If we are going to require the FBI to do the terrorism-related issues," she said, "we have to give them the resources to do the rest."

Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, the committee's ranking Republican, did not return calls seeking comment.

Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna, the state's highest-ranking Republican, said he is "very concerned that fewer financial crimes are being investigated by the FBI, in part because Washington ranks in the top 10 states for identity theft."

"The only real solution," he said, "is for the federal government to fill vacancies in the U.S. Attorney's Office and to increase staffing in the FBI's Seattle office. If you don't have the bodies to do the work, the work won't be done."

McKenna said he plans to bring up the issue of FBI resources next week when he travels to Washington, D.C., to meet with the state's congressional delegation.

Seattle police Chief Gil Kerlikowske suggested that the Justice Department could go after white-collar criminals by training and funding local police detectives to help investigate them.

Rep. Jay Inslee, a former prosecutor, said he blames the shortfall of resources for the FBI on vast amounts of money spent on the Iraq war. The Seattle-area Democrat promised to work to get the agents needed to return the FBI's criminal division to pre-9/11 levels.

"We've got to insist on restoring those cuts," he said. "One of the ways we can do that is redirecting the \$85 billion going into the sands of Iraq."

Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Seattle, said he is "angry over what the P-I uncovered," particularly major declines in FBI enforcement of a wide range of financial crimes, including mail, bank, insurance and wire fraud.

"You don't make America safer by weakening criminal divisions in the FBI, the front line of defense inside America, to bolster anti-terrorism efforts," McDermott said. "By transferring agents and not replacing them, the administration has opened new holes in our defenses, and that is a patently absurd strategy."

Republican Rep. Dave Reichert said the FBI needs to be staffed at a level that allows it to do its traditional job in white-collar crime. "They need additional resources," the former King County sheriff said.

The reallocation of agents following 9/11, however, forced the FBI to make long-needed changes, such as allowing other law enforcement agencies to take bigger roles in investigating bank robberies, drug trafficking and firearms violations, Reichert said.

It's no surprise to Annie McGuire - chief executive of Fraud Aid, a non-profit victims' advocacy organization - that the FBI doesn't have enough agents assigned to white-collar crime.

"Without the threat of the FBI, domestic fraud rings are running amok," she said. "The general feeling out there among people who have been defrauded is that nobody is going to do anything."

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THE TERRORISM TRADE-OFF

A six-month Seattle P-I investigation documented how a continuing shift of FBI agents to counterterrorism duties in the 5 1/2 years since 9/11 has strained the agency's ability to investigate a long list of crimes, from complex fraud schemes to hate crimes.

There have been sharp declines across the country in the numbers of cases taken to federal prosecutors, and experts believe thousands of crimes are simply going unprosecuted.

The trends, mirrored in Washington state, were detailed in the P-I's special report "The Terrorism Trade-off," published Wednesday.

To read the report, visit seattlepi.com/specials/fbi/.

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