

BILL SEEKS DETAILS ON FBI STAFFING - BOTH PARTIES BY MURRAY'S SIDE

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Congressional colleagues have joined Sen. Patty Murray in taking on the Bush administration over FBI staffing levels, approving a measure that requires the bureau for the first time to account for how - and where - agents are being used.

The rider Murray inserted into the appropriations bill approved Wednesday gives FBI Director Robert Mueller 60 days to answer.

Worried by reports that counterterrorism operations have drained traditional FBI law enforcement squads nationwide, Murray, D-Wash., mobilized colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

"It can become a hot political issue if anyone (in Congress) is accused of not protecting their citizens," Murray said.

Charles Mandigo, former FBI congressional liaison and special agent in charge of the Seattle office, predicted that Mueller's report will give Murray the ammunition she needs to boost the strength of the FBI in the Pacific Northwest.

"It lays the foundation for her to go forward to make the argument for more agents," Mandigo said. "Before, she was only looking at numbers, but didn't have the basis to argue about the process of allocating agents. This gives her the ability to argue about both the process and the numbers.

"Congressmen are going to look at this and say, 'How does this impact my district?'" he said.

"If and when the bill is signed," said FBI Deputy Assistant Director Mike Kortan, "we will certainly comply with the requirements."

President Bush is expected to sign the omnibus bill after forcing Congress to cut \$22 billion from domestic spending, including funds inserted by Murray and colleagues for the FBI.

Murray pledged to pursue her efforts on a bipartisan basis. As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, she sits on the panel that writes the FBI's budget.

"I will work with Republicans and Democrats to address the inequities. This will give us the information we need," she said.

The rider also forces the FBI to account for staffing disparities among offices that hit Seattle hard, the senator said.

Murray said she took action in response to a Seattle P-I investigation into how the Bush administration has slashed the FBI's criminal program in order to play a larger role in counterterrorism efforts.

Murray said that she has had frank conversations with Mueller and believes a substantial increase in agents is needed. Once the FBI has prepared its report, she said, the Appropriations Committee will begin examining where and how to give the bureau the additional funding it needs.

"One of the things that Mueller said to me was that with limited resources it was difficult to address the inequities," she said.

Six years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the White House has failed to replace at least 2,400 agents transferred to counterterrorism squads. The result has been a dramatic overall drop in traditional FBI investigations and case referrals.

Thousands of criminals likely have escaped federal prosecution, based on comparisons to pre-9/11 prosecutions. Since 2001, according to Justice Department data analyzed by the P-I, there has been a 34 percent drop in criminal cases referred to federal prosecutors, a 65 percent plunge in civil rights cases and a 30 percent decline in white-collar crime convictions.

In Western Washington, the drop has been even more severe. In this state, records show, the FBI sent 28 white-collar cases to prosecutors in 2005, down 90 percent from 2000.

The Democrat-led Congress passed the appropriations bill after Bush vetoed previous spending measures, and it contains domestic spending at the same level as the president's budget.

In order to meet Bush's budget levels, Democrats stripped out the \$30 million Murray previously added to the FBI's budget for additional criminal agents.

"One of the hits we took was the FBI agents," she said.

Murray has been lobbying publicly for Mueller to reinforce the Seattle field office of the FBI, which has far fewer agents per capita than most other offices in a state that has a disproportionately large number of federal criminal and homeland security responsibilities.

In September, Murray wrote an open letter to Mueller that having too few FBI agents in Washington puts the state at risk.

"I am very concerned about reports that the FBI may not have enough agents leaving our citizens more vulnerable to crimes," she wrote.

Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna called Murray's actions "adroit."

"It's not a coincidence that we have seen a dramatic increase in gangs and violent crime in the years that the FBI has had to shift its focus" he said Wednesday.

McKenna has also been calling on the FBI to bring reinforcements to Seattle, discussing his concerns in April during on-the-record comments.

In September, McKenna wrote his own letter to Mueller in which he called Seattle's agent compliment "disproportionately low."

The White House declined to comment Wednesday on the Murray rider. The Justice Department did not return a call seeking comment.

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The Bush administration's restructuring of the FBI after 9/11 has strengthened anti-terrorism efforts but depleted traditional crime units. Read the P-I's stories online at goto.seattlepi.com/r1175.

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