

More judges, prosecutors at risk 69% increase in threats since 2003



By Kevin Johnson
March 6, 2008

WASHINGTON — Threats against federal judges and prosecutors are on pace to rise for the fifth consecutive year, according to statistics from the U.S. Marshals Service.

In response, federal officials are expanding their surveillance efforts to include suspects who have threatened state and local authorities and who represent a possible danger to federal court officials.

The U.S. Marshals Service, the agency assigned to protect 2,000 federal judges and more than 5,000 prosecutors across the USA, tracked a 69% increase in "inappropriate communications" with federal officials from fiscal years 2003 to 2007. Those can include outright threats or a pattern of suspicious mailings. The numbers rose each year even though investigators in 2007 began counting multiple threats from the same suspect as one case.

This fiscal year is on pace to exceed 2007, with 503 threats through Feb. 9.

Authorities say they increasingly are seeing suspects begin by lashing out in public venues such as city council chambers and then escalating their activities to target federal judges and prosecutors.

"Historically, there was an expectation that you didn't mess with judges, prosecutors, jurors and police officers," says Michael Prout, the Marshals Service's deputy assistant director for judicial operations. "That tradition has been chipped away."

The February 2005 murders of a Chicago federal judge's husband and mother, and the slaying less than a month later of a state court judge in Atlanta, helped spur more intensive efforts to monitor judicial security, Prout says. He says the increase in threats makes identifying suspects quickly even more critical to prevent additional violence.

An expected rise in legal disputes related to the home foreclosure crisis likely will spawn more threats against judges and other court officials, he says.

David Sentelle, chairman of the security committee for the Judicial Conference of the United States, says the threats are a significant security concern to his colleagues, although there is no evidence they are driving jurists to quit. Sentelle, who also is chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, says his colleagues have become "exposed" as court dockets fill with more volatile disputes.

U.S. marshals have joined the investigation into the Feb. 7 shooting deaths of five people, including two police officers and two city council members, during a council meeting in Kirkwood, Mo. Ten days before the attack, the shooter lost a federal lawsuit in which he alleged that Kirkwood officials unfairly restricted his free speech rights during meetings.

"Was his next step going to be the federal judge? That's the kind of thing we're looking at," Prout says.

The increasing threat activity comes as the Marshals Service is under pressure by the Justice Department. A report last year by the department's inspector general said the Marshals Service failed to assess threat information quickly enough and did not adequately monitor possible security incursions at judges' homes.

Prout says the agency "appreciated" the inspector general's findings but suggested the report did not give enough credit for its recent work, including the hiring of investigators to focus exclusively on threat inquiries.

By next year, Prout hopes to begin expanding a federal database operated by the Secret Service to include suspects who have histories of disrupting local public meetings or threatening municipal government officials.

"It's critically important for the security of judges that we get this information before a person walks into the courthouse," he says.

Page 3A