

Judges Calling for More Protection in Wake of Chicago Murders

By Jennifer Ludden

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JENNIFER LUDDEN, host:

Funeral services were held today for Chicago attorney Michael Lefkow, the husband of federal Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow. He was slain execution style alongside his mother-in-law in the Lefkows' Chicago home. Two years ago, Judge Lefkow herself was the target of a murder plot by white supremacists. She told a newspaper this week she believes the murders of her husband and mother were linked to her work. NPR's David Schaper reports from Chicago that the killings are reverberating through courthouses across the country and leading some judges to call for greater security.

DAVID SCHAPER reporting:

In the first few hours after Judge Lefkow discovered the bodies of her husband and mother, one of the first to consol her was fellow US District Court Judge Wayne Anderson.

Judge WAYNE ANDERSON (US District Court): It's just horrible. It's horrible.

SCHAPER: A horrible incident certainly for family and friends, says Anderson, but also for judges and their families.

Judge ANDERSON: This was such a horrible crime that it jolted, I think, every judge in the nation.

SCHAPER: While violence against judges is rare, Anderson says threats come with the territory when putting people in prison or otherwise ruling in ways sure to upset one side or the other. And he says he and other judges accept that risk but their families may not.

Judge ANDERSON: When we took these great jobs, we did not mean to assume that kind of a risk for the people we love.

SCHAPER: With the security upgrades put in place after September 11th and the Oklahoma City bombing, Anderson says he and other federal judges have probably never felt safer inside of federal courthouses, but with terrorism abroad and at home and now these murders, he and other judges say they and their families have never felt more vulnerable outside of court. One particular concern is the amount of personal information available on the Internet. Judges are required to disclose financial data which eventually winds up online. Federal law allows judges to redact some of that information for security purposes, but that provision of the law is set to expire at the end of the year. Judges are calling on Congress to extend and strengthen the provision. Several judges also want better plans for protecting them and their families away from court when viable threats are made. Currently, that's done by the federal marshals in the Judicial Protection Service.

Representative JANICE **SCHAKOWSKY** (Illinois): Right now this division and the US Marshal Service is underfunded and understaffed.

SCHAPER: At a hastily called news conference in the concourse of O'Hare Airport this week, Illinois Congresswoman Jan **Schakowsky** told reporters the US Marshal Service is staffed at 75 percent of what it should be, and she says the Bush administration's budget won't change that.

Rep. **SCHAKOWSKY**: The budget increases that have been request really are not sufficient to meet that need.

SCHAPER: The US marshal in Chicago says he'd gladly take more funding and personnel if he could get it, but he insists his agency does a good job protecting judges and their families when needed. In one recent year, the Chicago office handled 20 separate security details for threatened federal judges and prosecutors, most of them around the clock, but a report last year by the Justice Department's inspector general criticized the Marshal Service's assessment and response to the more than 700 judicial threats it receives each year and said it failed to use technology like alarms and security cameras at judges' homes. According to Chicago US District Court Judge Marvin Aspen, there's a lot more at stake than just the protection of judges and their families.

Judge MARVIN ASPEN (US District Court): Our whole American justice system really depends upon a judge that is independent and secure in order to do the job.

SCHAPER: So Aspen says if judges and their families aren't safe, the whole justice system is jeopardized.

David Schaper, NPR News, Chicago.