

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

PRESS BRIEFING

NATIONAL CRIMINAL HISTORY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM
GRANTS TO 12 STATES

with
ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am pleased to be here to announce today that 12 states and the District of Columbia will receive \$20 million in awards under the National Criminal History Improvement Program. This initiative, which is funded by the Violent Crime Control Trust Fund, is an important step in implementing the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, the National Child Safety Protection Act, and it is a critically important step in crime control in this country.

These grants will help to make the Brady Act work, but they do much more. They show how the states and federal government are working together to fight crime, to protect public safety, and to prevent more crimes from happening.

With the funds provided here today, and over the next few months all 50 states will begin to receive the resources they need to improve, update and computerize their own criminal history record systems.

As this happens, the Justice Department,

the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Treasury Department will work together to tie the states into a national criminal history record system, so that law enforcement across America has access to the information they need to do the job.

Let us be clear: Improving criminal record systems is not about computers and bookkeeping, it's about fight crime in states and communities across America. It means providing law enforcement with the tools they need to prevent convicted criminals from purchasing handguns.

It means allowing judges, police officers and prosecutors to determine if suspects arrested by the police had outstanding warrants in other states or jurisdictions.

This is so important. Based on my experience as a prosecutor, nothing is more frustrating than to have somebody arrested, hold them, be prepared to go forward, but not receive word from another state that they're wanted, because the system is not available to access that state's records.

It means giving parents peace of mind by ensuring that those providing child care do not have criminal records, and it means letting all Americans know that convicted criminals cannot escape their criminal past by moving to another state.

As a prosecutor, I would watch someone picked up for a burglary, prosecuted and get a sentence that was commensurate with that burglary, without knowing, because we did not have access to other states' records, that they had prior histories that could have enhanced the sentence, and converted this into a career criminal case.

This is one of the most important tools that we can give to state and local law enforcement across this land. The National Criminal History Improvement Program will make a difference, but it's not going to happen overnight.

As you can see, there are more than 50 million criminal history records in existence. However, less than 15 million of these records are complete and available nationally.

The grants we are awarding are a significant step forward in our efforts to improve criminal records systems, but we have a long way to go before a national instant check system is in place.

The Brady Bill is working, and we can't turn back. We need to move forward, so that all 50.6 million records are complete, up-to-date, and accessible for all law enforcement in this country.

The hard work of many here today, including Congressman Schumer, who has made this program possible. I know that with their continuing support, and the bipartisan support of Congress, we will build a criminal history record system that works, both for law enforcement and the public.

I would now like to ask Secretary Rubin to say a few words.

SECRETARY RUBIN: Thank you, Janet.

I'd like to talk for a moment about how important the action being taken today is with respect to enforcement of the Brady Bill, Brady

Law, which, as you know, is the responsibility of ATF, a bureau of the Treasury Department.

The program that the Attorney General just announced has been a cooperative effort on the Hill and in the administration, and is a very important step forward.

We're nearly a year and a half into the Brady Law, and we know for a fact that it's keeping handguns out of the hands of people who have no business owning such weapons. Our Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which is doing a very good job with respect to implementation and enforcement, was asked to take a look at the results of this law.

The ATF estimated, in February, the one-year point for Brady, that it had stopped about 41,000 illegal handgun sales. There is clear proof that handguns are being kept away from convicted felons, fugitives, drug users, stalkers, spouse abusers and others, who simply have no business buying handguns.

And, very, very importantly, law abiding

Americans who want to own a handgun are still able to purchase one with minimal inconvenience.

The requirements of the Brady Law are reducing the availability of these weapons to the small percentage of people who use them to commit crimes. The importance of the Brady Law is reinforced by the crime numbers.

The last statistics available tell us that handguns figured in 86 percent of the violent crimes recorded in this country, and that handguns are responsible for more than 13,500 murders every years.

We want law enforcement personnel and firearm dealers to have a rapid way to tell if a potential handgun buyer has a criminal record, is under indictment, or faces a restraining order for potentially dangerous behavior.

With some 3.5 million handguns being sold each year, the faster police and dealers know the wrong people who are trying to buy guns, the better.

This program is an important step in

making it easier to ensure that people who have no business with a handgun can get one, and that law abiding citizens who want to buy a handgun can get a quick yes.

Thank you. With that, let me turn the podium over to Congressman Chuck Schumer, who, as the Attorney General said, has been an enormous force toward enactment of the Brady Law, and in general, an enormous force for good in this area.

CONGRESSMAN SCHUMER: Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and I would like to thank the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Treasury, and all of my colleagues, as well as the men and women of law enforcement who are here represented today, for their invaluable help in making today a reality.

This is one of those days where the importance of what's going to happen out there in the field is far greater than the attention given it here today. The reason for that is, if -- well, let me tell you a little story.

When I first got to Congress I was sort of obsessed with trying to do something real about

crime, and I went to a variety of experts and said, what can I do as a freshman congressman to try and make sure that my constituents, and the constituents across America, are safe?

Probably the smartest person I went to in that area was a professor -- still a professor -- named James Wilson -- James Q. Wilson -- he's pretty famous -- and at that point in time he told me, the best thing you can do is update criminal records, that when a cop makes an arrest, when a D.A. gets handed over a sheet on someone who has been arrested, when a judge is ready to set bail, if they don't know the extensive record of prior convictions they're at a loss as to what to do.

And even in my city of New York, where crime had been -- and still is -- probably the number one problem, and we're supposedly up-to-date technologically -- most of the records in those days were on cards in shoe boxes, and they'd have to go through and look for the name, et cetera.

Well, we've come a significant way since then, but as the chart that the Attorney General

pointed out, not far enough. If you look, less than a third of our records are available, and when it says "nationally available," that means available anywhere.

In New York, if you make an arrest you may not want to find out if the criminal is wanted for a crime in Nevada, you may want to find out is he wanted for a crime -- if he was arrested in Brooklyn if he's wanted for a crime in the Bronx, which means you've got to send the record up to Albany, have it come back, and they didn't know.

Well, this grant is going to help not only my state -- \$4.8 million -- but many of the states represented here to be able to get more bang for the buck, to focus their attentions on the recidivist criminal who commits crime after crime after crime, rather than someone who might have the first arrest at a low level crime.

This program, by updating the records, means you take someone's fingerprint, you can feed it into a computer and you know the entire criminal history that is constitutionally allowed,

throughout the country.

That is a gift. It's a gift to our police officers, it's a gift to our judges, it's a gift to our prosecutors, and we're doing it, and I'd just like to make one other point.

This is one of the areas, God bless it, where the NRA and people like myself have agreed. And in fact, this was put into the Brady Bill, this system to update criminal records, because what they said is, well, we don't want our people to have to wait five days.

We said, well, we don't want the people to have to wait five days, but we've got to make sure, as both the Secretary and the Attorney General pointed out, that they're not felons or mentally incompetent before they get a gun, and the only way to do that is to update the records.

So even though we fought over the Brady Bill, and fought over the assault weapon ban, and we're fighting over cop-killer bullets, and God knows what else, on this issue, having the most up-to-date criminal records, there is only unanimity

in the criminal justice system, and even all the way to the NRA -- at least, I would characterize it all the way to the NRA -- that it's necessary.

And so this is a great day. It's a great day for my community, it's a great day for law enforcement, it's a great day for America.

And all of you out there writing, this really is going to do far more to make our streets safer than lots of other things that you'll hear a lot more about.

And it is now my pleasure -- and I'm going to have to excuse myself because we have a vote in five minute in the House, with my colleagues Floyd Flake and Ray Thornton of Arkansas, both of whom have done a great deal in law enforcement.

I was going to introduce Congressman Goodling, but he's now here, so it's now my honor to introduce the Police Commissioner of Vermont -- I just spent a little time in Vermont, in Brattleboro -- my uncle lives in Massachusetts, the only place where the 1960s are alive and well in America -- it's very safe.

[Laughter.]

CONGRESSMAN SCHUMER: I'd like to introduce the Police Commissioner of Vermont who'd done a great job, Jim Walton.

COMMISSIONER WALTON: Thank you, Congressman. And send your friends too -- we can use those tax dollars down our way, all of them.

[Laughter.]

COMMISSIONER WALTON: You know, it's already been said here, and it will be repeated by myself: What's being done here indeed is a major step forward for law enforcement across this country. We will make a difference through the implementation of these NCHIP grants.

It's interesting that perhaps one of the smallest states in the nation has its police commissioner invited to speak today, and I looked around to see why, and it might have been the fact that we were 49th in the nation in terms of our accuracy of our criminal history records -- that may have had something to do with it.

[Laughter.]

COMMISSIONER WALTON: But we're working on it, General, thanks to you, and thanks to our senators who have worked so hard on our behalf here, we will make a difference in it.

We are recipient of a \$1.9 million grant. Somebody asked me why I was going to Washington and I said, any time they want to give me \$1.9 million, I'll travel to Washington to be with them as a part of that.

But there really are a lot of people to thank for this. I want to thank Dr. Chaiken, Jan Chaiken, and his people in the Bureau of Justice Statistics, for this. I want to especially thank the hard work of Senator Patrick Leahy as he worked for us on the crime bill, in getting it passed, and working to make sure that it was tailored to address the needs of rural states like Vermont.

And I might add, some of the rural counties out there. We're about the size, in terms of population, of many of the counties that might be represented here today by some of the law enforcement people.

And in addition to that, I simply want to thank the American taxpayer for footing the bill on this.

This will make a difference. The implementation of the NCHIP grant across this country will make a difference that will last far beyond those of us who stand up here today. We're making infrastructure changes with this that will indeed bring law enforcement at least on par, I think, with the criminals in this country.

Right now a criminal can slip in from state to state, he can in fact -- or she can -- pull off their criminal behavior, even be arrested in many states and jurisdictions, and pay the fine, or even serve the penalty for the crime they were caught for, and be guilty of far worse crimes, be searched for on warrants across the country, and still leave the state, or leave the county, or leave the local jurisdiction, without ever having been found out.

Because we've not brought technology -- the technology exists, but we've not brought it

into play for law enforcement. This grant will allow us to do that in Vermont, it will allow us to do that across the country, in law enforcement agencies, state, local and federal, as we work together to make this happen.

Again, thank you, General, for the help; thank you, Mr. Secretary and Senators for your contribution and effort on our behalf, and I don't have anybody to turn the podium over to. I'll just step back.

[Laughter.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We also want to thank Senators Leahy and Jeffords for being here. I know they both understand how critically important this is to law enforcement. Senator Conrad was here just a moment ago, and we appreciate his support for this effort.

We would be happy to try and answer questions.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when do you think the system will be completed, and how much more money do you think it might take?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It's estimated, as I understand it, that the total cost is \$220 million; \$100 million was appropriated in this past session, and this is part of that \$100 million. The rest of it will be distributed by the end of the fiscal year.

In addition, \$27 million has been previously appropriated to the Bureau of Justice Statistics for a general improvement of criminal history records.

In addition, 5 percent of Byrd Grant (?) monies from since 1992 have been earmarked and have been required to be set aside for criminal history improvement. That brings the number almost to about \$204 million, and we estimate that working together with the states we will be able to see this system hopefully in place by 1998.

QUESTION: General, what's the difference between this system and the National Crime Information System?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: With the National Crime Information System, what you have got to do

it's all -- ultimately all criminal histories, they will not be useful unless they tie in together, unless the commissioner in Vermont, as he arrests somebody, and query, through automation, all the 50 states to see if that person is wanted, if there's an arrest warrant outstanding in another state, if he has a prior conviction.

He may have a man with one robbery; if he has a prior conviction for robbery, he may be a career criminal, and may be eligible for treatment as a career criminal. He won't be able to find that out unless he can access all the records.

So it's to develop accurate systems, plus accessing all systems.

SENATOR LEAHY: If I might just add one thing to that, General. I remember, as a prosecutor, having cases where we checked NCIC when we picked up somebody and found no record. Then it turns out the car they were in -- and they were from Arizona, for example -- and we checked down and somebody made the expense of a long-distance call to the police chief in this town, and he said,

oh yeah, we've been looking all over for that person, and that's how we found him.

But as the General says, like any computer system or anything else, it's what goes in it that can come out of it, and we just had no way of doing it.

DR. CHAIKEN: The NCIC system connects police departments together with the national system, and allows them to access arrest information, warrants, a whole bunch of information, and one part of what they can access through this communications network is these criminal history records.

So the NCIC system is part of the backbone that allows law enforcement agencies to reach these centers. What our grants are accomplishing is making those records complete and accessible through NCIC and other systems with an accurate update.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when the national system is completed, by 1998 or whenever, will that mean the end of the five-day Brady waiting period?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the timing is such that by 1998 the instant check will go into effect, and that's why it's so important that we update the records, make sure they're accurate, and make sure they're accessible.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:02 a.m., the briefing was concluded.]

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