

Tackling Chicago's crime-ridden neighborhoods

Operation Legend and other federal programs provide help to lower Chicago's murder rate

By David A. Keene

Illinois Democrats were outraged earlier this summer when the Trump administration decided to send federal agents from the FBI, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the Department of Homeland Security to Chicago in an effort to help local police reduce the Windy City's escalating murder rate.

Between May 25 and the beginning of June, 25 Chicagoans had been gunned down and another 85 wounded, according to the Chicago Sun-Times. May 31 had, in fact, been the most violent day in Chicago in more than six decades with 18 people left dead on the streets.

Still, Gov. J.B. Pritzker called the move "wrong-headed" and the city's fiery mayor, Lori Lightfoot, who had earlier said of the president, "What I really want to say to Donald Trump begins with 'F' and ends with 'U.'" appeared on MSNBC to promise that she would use "every tool" to keep the president from sending "troops" into the city. Promising that she would not have "tyranny in the city of Chicago," the mayor said she would go to court to keep federal forces out of the city. Illinois Sens. Tammy Duckworth and Dick Durbin questioned the federal involvement as well, but in less colorful language.

Many Chicagoland residents living in gang-ridden neighborhoods on the city's West and South sides, however, liked the idea. A Reuters reporter interviewed residents of the city's wealthier neighborhoods and found eight of 10 interviewed agreed with the mayor in opposing any federal intervention to deal with Chicago's epidemic of violence, but that support for federal intervention was much higher among those living and working in more crime-ridden parts of Chicago.

To her credit, once Ms. Lightfoot realized what the president was actually proposing she softened her criticism. The federal officers dispatched to Chicago are part of a Justice



Department operation dubbed “Operation Legend” to work with local law enforcement agencies to arrest and charge felons illegally found in possession of a firearm under federal rather than state and local laws.

Much and perhaps most of Chicago’s crime and violence is traceable to repeat violent offenders who have for years roamed the city’s streets without fear of arrest or conviction on these charges. That is already changing. Last week, a previously convicted armed robber was sentenced to 15 years in federal court after being arrested in possession of a gun, and three other felons in possession were charged and will face federal mandatory sentences when convicted.

These arrests contrast with Chicago’s decades long refusal to either cooperate with the “feds” on such matters or pursue stiff sentences against armed criminals and gangbangers in possession of illegal weapons. Former Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson observed five years ago that Chicago’s criminal violence was “directly related to the lack of accountability for gun offenders.”

He went on to say, “In Chicago, nearly 85 percent of shooting victims have previously been involved in a gun crime as a victim or offender.” That remains true today and yet for years the federal jurisdiction reporting the fewest federal prosecutions of felons in possession of illegal firearms has been Chicago.

“Project Legend” along with two other Justice Department programs, “Project Guardian” and “Project Safe Neighborhoods,” “Project Legend” is, in reality, an expanded version of a program first successfully implemented in the ’90s in Richmond, Virginia, where the U.S. Attorney and local police and prosecutors launched what they called “Project Exile,” promising criminals who used guns no bail, no plea bargains, federal prosecution and a minimum of five years behind bars.

The National Rifle Association supported the program and paid for billboards and other ads trumpeting the costs of using a gun in a crime in Richmond. When “Project Exile” was launched in 1997, Richmond had the second-highest murder rate in the country. Within three years, it dropped by more than 40% as it became clear to criminals operating in the city that they wouldn’t “walk” if they used a firearm illegally. Since then, several other cities and a few states have implemented similar programs with success, but it wasn’t until Donald Trump moved into the White House that Justice Department officials began encouraging greater cooperation in arresting and referring such cases to the federal courts.

During his 2016 campaign, candidate Donald Trump’s campaign website cheered the success of “Project Exile” and promised that in a Trump administration the program would be expanded. His first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, was a strong supporter of the program, and it appears that Attorney General William Barr shares their view, which looms as good news for

residents of Chicago's crime-ridden neighborhoods and very bad news for the city's recidivist criminals.

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