FBI's Costly Plan to Whip the Paperwork

Washington

The FBI proposed yesterday what it called "an extraordinary crash program" to wipe out the bureau's blacklog of freedom-of-information requests and begin complying with the deadlines fixed by law.

Responding to pressures from a House Judiciary subcommittee, FBI Director Clarence Kelley estimated that it would cost $11.8 million in the fiscal year beginning October 1 to catch up with and then keep up with the demands for FBI records that have been pouring into the bureau in recent months.

It now takes nine months for the FBI to respond to even routine requests for documents, although the law imposes a ten-day deadline. By January, 1977, FBI officials estimate, the backlog will amount to 9.9 million pages waiting "to be processed."

At a hearing yesterday morning before the subcommittee, the Justice Department's freedom-of-information chief, Quinlan J. Shea Jr., said in a prepared statement that the department would "seek the requisite authority" to ask Congress for the extra money.

"The Department of Justice supports the bureau's proposal — drastic situations require equivalent remedies," Shea said.

However, he said the department "simply cannot accept" the FBI's estimate of a continuing cost of $6.4 million a year for freedom-of-information requests once the backlog is wiped out. Instead, he maintained, both the freedom-of-information and privacy acts ought to be changed to make them less of a burden on the bureaucracy.