

Government Witnesses in Danger Given

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WASHINGTON, April 25— That new family moving in down the street. Who are they?

The odds are that they are just a normal American family setting up housekeeping in a new community or neighborhood.

But twice each day, on the average, a family with an entirely new identity—furnished by the Federal Government—moves into a new neighborhood to begin a new life.

The new identity is days, perhaps only hours, old. Children are good at playing this game, but they may have trouble remembering their new names when they go off to school.

The witness relocation program, operated for the Justice Department by the United States Marshal's Service, began almost by accident seven years ago. Since then, it has burgeoned into an \$11-million-a-year operation that will move some 700 witnesses and their families to new homes this year.

Federal prosecutors say that the program, which reportedly has a perfect batting average so far for protecting witnesses from retaliation, has been a key element in the Government's effort to crack down on organized crime.

Demonstrated Danger

For the witnesses, the program offers a high degree of protection from a threat that has been demonstrated repeatedly.

In Las Vegas recently, a man was offered a chance to assume a new identity, but refused it. When he opened the door of his motel room, he was decapitated by a blast from a shotgun.

A New England lawyer was warned that his life was in danger, but refused to move to another city. A bomb planted in his car exploded when he turned the ignition key, crippling him for life.

Linda Kuzmack, an aide to Gerald Shur, who runs the Criminal Division's part of the operation in the Jusi Justice Department, recalled another case.

"Shall we tell him about the doorknob?" she asked Mr. Shur.

"This guy had been relocated safely," Mr. Shur said, "but there was a death in his family and the marshals took him back to his old home city to the funeral. When it was over, he was told to go to his new home. Instead, he went back to where he used to live. When he turned the doorknob, a bomb went off and killed him."

Some Are Prosperous

John Cameron, associate director of the Marshal's Service in charge of witness security, emphasized in an interview that instances in which witnesses have been harmed—through their failure to take the advice of the marshals—were rare exceptions, and in no case had a witness's enemies succeeded in tracking him down and harming him.

In most cases, he said, the more than 1,100 witnesses given new identities so far are safe and, in some cases, prosperous.

But getting into the program can be an abrupt and traumatic episode for a family.

Often, Mr. Shur said, a person with knowledge about a crime will suddenly agree to tell what he or she knows in a meeting with a United States attorney or a lawyer for an organized crime strike force.

"Linda or I may get a call at night or on the weekend," Mr. Shur said, "from a U. S. attorney who says he's just turned a witness and he's afraid the person may be beaten or killed over the weekend."

A single call to Mr. Cameron's office in Falls Church, Va. can provide immediate protection before the witness leaves the prosecutor's office.

But before a person can be taken into the program, approval from an assistant attorney general is needed, since each

case may involve spending several thousand dollars.

The marshals immediately move the person to a so-called safe house, where a special guard is not needed, and one of Mr. Cameron's 15 relocation specialists moves in to learn everything he needs to know to make the change in identity successful.

"First we put him into a safe area, check his background, education, any medical problems. We go into everything that might be a problem to him or to us in his new location.

"He has to sever all ties and become a new individual and he has to make a decision he wants to do this," Mr. Cameron said.

In cases where the danger seems great, the witness may be whisked off to a safe place while a marshal goes to his home, gets his wife and picks up the family's children at school.

"They just do not go back home. It's just that quick," Mr. Cameron said. And although Mr. Cameron tends to talk of "he" and "him," many women witnesses have been relocated, and in some cases, both a husband and wife have been witnesses.

New Lives

Names Changed Legally

In one recent case, he said, a husband and wife were relocated from Gary, Ind., to Fort Worth, Tex. The husband got involved with a truck hijacking gang and was killed by his new associates. For protection, his wife was moved a second time and given still another new identity.

In every relocation, Mr. Cameron said, one of the first steps is to arrange to have the names of the family members legally changed so that when they tell people their new names they will be telling the truth.

Then comes the question of where they can safely move and make a living.

Sometimes, Mr. Cameron said, the fact that a person has agreed to testify in one trial may put him in danger from many others who fear he may also tell what he knows about them. One of the biggest jobs of the relocation specialists is to ferret out these other sources of danger.

Some witnesses have complained that they can't live safely anywhere in this country, so in a few cases, the marshals have found them new homes abroad.

In most cases, however, the major consideration in relocating a witness is finding a job for someone who has no background and can't get a single reference.

Mr. Shur helped solve this problem several years ago when he asked the United States Chamber of Commerce to help him set up meetings with small groups of businessmen around the country to talk about organized crime.

'Send Me Another One'

After Mr. Shur talked for a couple of hours, his listeners would ask what they could do to help.

Now, there are some 150 businesses around the country that will accept people with no references except for the word of the marshals on their background.

"I was turned down only twice," Mr. Shur said. "These businessmen have employed hundreds of people."

"One man called the other day and said, 'Your boy is going to jail but I want to send me another one.'"

When a witness arrives in his new community, he has far less plastic in his wallet than most people in our credit card society. The marshals arrange for a Social Security card in his new name and a driver's license if he had a valid one before, but they provide only the minimum necessary for the witness to get by in his new life.

But even this can be difficult and hundreds of persons throughout the country have cooperated with the marshals in creating new backgrounds for relocated families.

School officials take records from schools that relocated children had attended and create new records, complete to the written notes of teachers. These records are forwarded to the children's new school. They are accurate except that they come from a school different from the one listed.

Fraudulent Engineer

If the witness had a college degree or a professional license, the marshals will provide him with credentials in his name. But they won't provide him with anything he didn't legitimately have before. And they won't help him establish a charge account or get a credit card even if he had credit and credit cards before.

"We had a fellow who claims he was a civil engineer and he asked that we get him a new license," Mr. Cameron said. "When we dug in, we found he didn't even have a college degree. He was upset when he found we weren't going to perpetuate his fraud and get him a new license because he wasn't entitled to the one he had."

The sometimes inflated expectations of witnesses has one of the biggest problems in the program.

By the very nature of the operation, it is difficult to find out how well it works with regard to individual satisfaction. Two years ago, however, one relocated witness, Jerald Martin Zelmanowitz, complained bitterly in testimony before a Senate subcommittee that promises made by the Federal agents, with whom he had dealt before he testified against an organized crime figure, had not been kept.

Mr. Zelmanowitz seems, however, to have received just the minimum kind of help that Mr. Cameron says is routine. The problem apparently arose because of promises Mr. Cameron says were made before the marshals took over.

Mr. Zelmanowitz has a suit pending against the Government, and neither Mr. Shur nor Mr. Cameron would go into details about his case. But Mr. Cameron acknowledged that there had been instances in which witnesses said they had been promised much more than the Government delivered.

Strict View Guidelines

"I don't want to put the finger on anybody, but there have been some misunderstandings," Mr. Cameron said.

As a result, the department issued stern new guidelines in January, warning that no one except a member of Mr. Cameron's operation was permitted to explain the program to a witness or to make any premises.

In addition to his new identity and help in finding a job, the witness gets a place to live and subsistence payments of up to \$1,000 a month (more in exceptional circumstances).

Mr. Cameron's goal is to process each witness, from the relocation specialist's first talks with him to the time his subsistence payments end, within 90 days. In some cases, however, especially when the witness must return frequently to what

Mr. Cameron refers to as the "danger area" for court appearances, the period may run significantly longer.

While the vast majority of witnesses who have been relocated have successfully adjusted to their new lives—one has even become a millionaire—some of the families face difficult personal and emotional problems.

What about teen-agers who are in love? Can anything be done to ease the pain of an abrupt, perhaps unexplained, disappearance? Mr. Shur and Mr. Cameron shrug. Not much.

And what about a divorced father whose former wife has

been relocated with their children and her new husband?

"The previous husband wants to see the children. What does he do? He's in a bind because we're not going to tell him where they are," Mr. Cameron said. "And we can't arrange a visit because someone else would know and who knows which side he's on. Some cases have developed that are very difficult."

"In a case like this, about all you can possibly do is relay the wishes to the wife and then relay back to him what perhaps could be worked out. It's between them if they can work it out."