

U.S. Marshals Service Talks WitSec to the World

(WASHINGTON D.C.) – If you pass by any novelty t-shirt stand in Washington D.C., you're bound to see a rather plain white cotton t-shirt with the phrase, "You Don't Know Me," on one line and "Federal Witness Protection Program" on another. From Hollywood movies to paperback fiction novels, there is a fascination, a mystique, surrounding the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) Witness Security Program, known within the USMS simply as "WitSec."

"Part of the mystique comes because the Program is so successful, yet the public knows very little, if anything, about it," said Sylvester Jones, Assistant Director of the Witness Security and Prisoner Operations Division. "If you convince a mobster to testify, he joins the Program, and takes down an entire family with his testimony. It has created a global interest in this American Program."



Assistant Director Sylvester Jones

That global interest prompted the USMS to host the first-ever Witness Security Symposium, held at USMS Headquarters last week. The USMS hosted seventeen nations at the inaugural conference. "One of our goals was to expand the international community of witness security experts," said Chief Inspector Joe Paonessa of the Witness Security Program. "We want to take the success story we have in the Marshals Service and share it with an international law enforcement community."

By the reaction received at the end of the conference, their goals were met. "I think the contacts I made here will be the most valuable part of this symposium," said a Lithuanian law enforcement official involved with his country's Witness Protection Program. "I know that if I ever have an issue, I can reach out to the people I've met here this week."

Since its inception, more than 18,000 witnesses and their families have been relocated in various parts of the United States under the WitSec program. These people are given new names, new identities, assistance with employment, and vocational training, among other services as needed. Simply put, they're given a new life. In a country as large as the United States, relocating a witness half-way across the country greatly assists in ensuring witness anonymity. For smaller nations like Lithuania and Bosnia, relocating within that country may not guarantee that witness stays hidden for very long. "In my country, there are about 60 cases, or 150 people, in our Program," said a law enforcement officer from Poland. "In smaller countries, we have to work hard to make sure they are protected."

That is why many nations are now relocating their witnesses to other countries. As a result of this week's conference, three nations, Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro, signed a tri-lateral agreement allowing trans-national relocation for each country's protected witness. "I couldn't have imagined that would have happened," said Kearn Knowles, who witnessed the signing on one of his final days with the Marshals Service. "As I end my career with the Marshals Service, I couldn't have scripted a better ending to my career. It was nice, to say the least," he said. Knowles retired from the Service after more than 23 years, spending much of his time in the WitSec Program.

The USMS prides itself on the fact that no single witness has ever been harmed while following the guidelines of the Program. To those involved in WitSec, this is no accident.

America's Star: FY*i*

"I try to emphasize to all of them that they have been given a second chance. They have a whole new lease on life – literally, and few people get that opportunity," said Mike, a longtime Inspector in the Witness Security Program. "For many of these witnesses, though, it is hard. So, I end up being more than just an Inspector. To these witnesses, I'm a social worker, priest, counselor, and, in a sense their business partner."

That "partnership" has proved profitable. When a protected witness has testified, federal prosecutors have secured convictions in 89 percent of those trials. And to U.S. Marshals Service Director John Clark, that is a story worth telling. "From helping convict Al-Qaeda terrorists, to bringing down the mob, the Program provides an important tool for law enforcement," he said. "To the extent that we can, I want to share our success story, and I think this symposium went a long way in doing that."



Director John F. Clark speaking at WitSec conference

While the Marshals Service often can't and won't discuss the WitSec Program in public, the opening session was opened to the press. "When I walked in with the reporters and saw the WitSec Inspectors providing security at the doors, even I didn't realize they worked in the Program," said Dave Turner of USMS Public Affairs. "It was strange, but the reporters seemed grateful they got a peek behind the curtain." The session was well attended, with the symposium making news across the country.

The public's fascination with the Witness Security Program is not limited to the United States, however. The Lithuanian law enforcement official attending the symposium noted that journalists in his country continue to try and lift the veil of secrecy surrounding their Program. "They will write fantastic stories about it," he said. "However, most of the information is based solely on the imagination of the journalist -- rarely on fact," he said with a smile. Seems they are not too far behind the Americans in sensationalizing a program we at USMS are proud to call our own.

For more about the WitSec program at USMS, go to: www.usmarshals.gov/witsec