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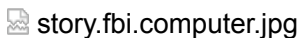SEARCH   ⊙ The Web   ○ CNN.com   [   ]   **Search**

U.S.

Report: FBI wasted millions on 'Virtual Case File'

Mueller says he'll decide on software within two months

From Terry Frieden
CNN Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- FBI Director Robert Mueller promised a Senate panel late Thursday that he will decide within two months whether to scrap special computer software for FBI agents after a report sharply criticized the program.

Whatever his decision, Mueller told senators he believes FBI agents will have the software they need within one year.

Facing unusual grilling by previously supportive senators -- armed with the report by the Justice Department's inspector general -- Mueller vowed to inform the lawmakers "two months from today" on whether any portion of the $170 million Virtual Case File (VCF) software program can be salvaged.

He also promised to tell them at that time how much additional money would be needed to complete the project.

Mueller testified that if a current test shows the project has to be scrapped, he estimates the loss to taxpayers at $104 million.

"I do not take that lightly," Mueller said. "I am tremendously disheartened."

The computer program was aimed at providing field agents with an efficient tool to quickly organize, analyze and communicate data on criminal and terrorism cases.

But the much-anticipated 81-page report by Inspector General Glenn Fine indicated the project was on the verge of being a complete loss.

"After more than three years and $170 million expected to be spent developing the Virtual Case File, the FBI has not provided a clear timetable or prospect for completing the VCF," the report said.

"In the interim, the critical need to replace the FBI's obsolete case management system remains," concludes the 81-page report.

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Blame shared

The FBI had recently admitted the Virtual Case File technology, which had been delivered by contractor Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC), had failed to meet the bureau's requirements and that much of the time and effort invested had been lost.

Mueller said the FBI and the contractor shared the blame.

Lawmakers and the contractor agreed that the intense pressure to get a product out to FBI agents following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, contributed to the problem.

"This was both SAIC and the FBI all going to the sounds of the gun with our heads down on a very ambitious, high risk, highly concurrent project," SAIC Executive Vice President Arnold Punaro told reporters.

Punaro will testify before the Senate panel at a later date.

The FBI has established a short-term project in its New Orleans office to determine whether any portion of the VCF project can be salvaged.

In the meantime, the FBI is continuing to explore with outside consultants the prospecting of purchasing commercially available off-the-shelf software.

The report named several reasons for the costly problems: the change in the FBI's prime mission from criminal investigations to preventing terrorism, poor management decisions early in the project, and inadequate oversight for the continuing costly problems.

The FBI's much-documented technology shortcomings have been viewed by FBI executives, lawmakers, and outside experts as a critical problem since the attacks. Critics say the FBI fails to analyze and communicate counterterrorism data efficiently.

In his testimony, Mueller conceded the report's findings are "consistent with the FBI's internal reviews."

"I can assure you nobody is more frustrated than I am," Mueller told the lawmakers.

Chairman Judd Gregg, a New Hampshire Republican, criticized "the extreme waste of taxpayer dollars," and wanted to know who was to blame.

Speed information sharing

In a response contained in the inspector general's report, the FBI pointed to its Investigative Data Warehouse. The FBI said that program provides agents, intelligence analysts and members of Joint Terrorism Task Forces with access to 47 sources of counterterrorism data, including information from FBI files, other government agencies and open-source news feeds.

The inspector general, however, said the program does not sufficiently provide the needed capability.

"The Investigative Data Warehouse, while perhaps a useful tool, does not manage case workflow and does not substitute for an effective case management system," the report concluded. "Consequently, the FBI continues to lack critical tools necessary to maximize the performance of both its criminal investigative and national security missions."

Counterterrorism information collected by agents gets top priority and is entered into the warehouse system within 24 hours.

Information dealing with such matters as violent crime, organized crime, fraud and other white-collar crime may take days to be shared throughout the law enforcement community, according to an FBI official.

The new software program was supposed to allow agents to pass along intelligence and criminal information in real time.

The report reviewed the FBI's progress in its entire project to upgrade its computer systems, called Trilogy, which includes not only the case-management system but also

infrastructure components such as computer hardware and the high-speed network between FBI facilities and units.

Although the FBI now largely has in place the desktops and other needed hardware, the inspector general said modernization projects now completed came in late despite a $78 million appropriation designed specifically to accelerate them.

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