

## FBI team takes aim at government corruption

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ATLANTA (AP) - The FBI has assembled a new squad to investigate corruption among judges and legislators in Georgia, though the top federal agent in the state is being tightlipped about what cases are developing.

Brian Lamkin, who heads the FBI office in Georgia, told The Associated Press he decided to form the team after months of reviews and a look at the bureau's long-term priorities.

Georgia's FBI office has long used a single squad that handled the brunt of corruption cases, from law enforcement officials to government officials. But Lamkin set up a special team to look into wrongdoing by police and other law enforcement officers and landed string of recent corruption charges. That team will still check out officers while the second new corruption squad will have a different goal, he said.

"It impacts the everyday system. It's not just a dirty law enforcement officer that might be shaking you down," he said. "You're talking about people that you elect to an office to represent you who try to line their pockets."

Lamkin will personally sign off on the investigations before they go forward, and high-profile cases will be approved by FBI officials in Washington, he said.

"The reason is a corruption investigation can ruin reputations," he said.

"These are not quick hits. We will use sophisticated techniques and undercover operations to really go after these. That's why the individuals that work these have to be patient."

Lamkin wouldn't say how large the team is, but he said he's assigned about 40 percent of the staff in the bureau's white-collar crimes unit to the mission.

The move was welcomed by government officials, who believed state and local funding cuts over the last few years have eroded other investigations.

"I just appreciate it. One of the frustrations you hear is that with the state budget cuts, you don't have the resources to hire more investigators," said state Rep. Joe Wilkinson, who chairs the House Ethics Committee. "This brings another much-needed level of scrutiny to the system."

Fulton County Sheriff Ted Jackson, who has asked the FBI to investigate deputies at the Fulton County Jail for wrongdoing, applauded the new oversight. That probe led to charges in June against four guards accused of smuggling drugs and cell phones into the jail.

"The FBI has been working with us to rid this agency of corruption and investigate other crimes involving civil rights," said Jackson, a former FBI agent himself. "This effort is beneficial to the public by rooting out corrupt activity which costs taxpayers."

The new squad was formed as rounds of budget cuts have depleted key state investigative agencies.

The Judicial Qualifications Commission nearly ran out of money in December to investigate judicial misconduct, but state lawmakers gave it a financial boost this year.

The agency has forced several judges to resign, and recently recommended that a north Georgia judge be ousted from the bench after concluding that he pointed a gun at himself in the courtroom and berated his boss in a bizarre televised rant.

And the Georgia Ethics Commission, which investigates finance complaints and registers lobbyists, has been rocked by deep funding cuts even as it takes on more duties. The commission's director resigned after a dispute over the agency's budget and the status of several cases involving Gov. Nathan Deal. And it went from fielding three investigators in 2008 to none now, said William Perry, the director of Common Cause Georgia.

"Our state is cutting back on monitoring elected officials and their ethical behavior, so we welcome the fact that the federal government is stepping up," he said.

Lamkin still remembers the first corruption case as a field agent. It involved a food inspector who took \$1,000 to look the other way at a Virginia naval base. It may not seem like a lot of money, he said, but don't try to tell that to a sailor who ate the tainted food.

"We don't take this lightly," he said. "These are truly the types of investigations that are being done in the back room. And the circle of friends is very small. In order to penetrate that inner circle, you've got to have a strong and tenacious group to develop the intelligence."

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