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Law officials map out strategy to catch more fugitives

Federal, state, local agencies vow to work more closely together

By [David Jackson](#) and [Gary Marx](#), Chicago Tribune reporters

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At a 90-minute closed-door meeting Thursday, top federal, state and local law enforcement officials laid out plans to improve the government's faltering efforts to apprehend violent fugitives who cross U.S. borders to evade justice in Illinois.

The officials from the Justice Department and various northern Illinois agencies pledged to more closely coordinate their international fugitive apprehension programs, better manage their mounting caseloads and train local prosecutors and police in the often-complex and lengthy extradition process.

"There's a feeling that this is a growing problem, an expensive problem and a large challenge to our system of justice," said U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, who convened the meeting and spoke to reporters afterward. "I think the response at the table was extremely positive at all levels."

Attending the working session with Durbin were U.S. Deputy Attorney General James Cole — the No. 2 official in the Justice Department — as well as U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, the Chicago heads of the FBI and the U.S. Marshals Service, and Timothy Williams, director of Interpol in Washington.

The local officials included Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, the state's attorneys from Cook, DuPage and Will counties, representatives from the Illinois attorney general's office, the Chicago Police Department and the Illinois State Police.

Durbin called together those officials in response to a recent investigative series by the Chicago Tribune that found dangerous criminals were able to cross the border and remain at large because of an astonishing lack of coordination among Justice Department officials, county prosecutors and local police; a failure by these agencies to keep track of their cases; and inexplicable, years-long delays.

After Thursday's closed-door meeting, Durbin announced that Fitzgerald would train Illinois law enforcement agencies on the extradition system at three upcoming seminars in Chicago, Springfield and a third location outside Chicago.

Will County State's Attorney James Glasgow later said through a spokesman that his office would "take full advantage" of the sessions and send "multiple attorneys."

Durbin also urged county criminal court judges to set higher bonds for violent criminals who present flight risks — a weakness pointed out in the series.

And he endorsed a bill introduced by Illinois lawmakers that will make it possible to prosecute close family

members for aiding or harboring a fugitive, another loophole highlighted by one article in the series. Prosecutors said the reform would help them locate fugitives and bring them to justice.

But Durbin did express frustration with significant hurdles that remain. Local prosecutors sometimes find it prohibitively expensive to prepare and translate the extensive legal paperwork needed to request a fugitive's arrest and extradition from a foreign government. "We're talking about thousands of dollars," Durbin said.

Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, who noted that her office has faced recent budget and staff cuts, added that "the cost that really is laid on local prosecutors is enormous."

Another issue hampering extraditions is continued lack of cooperation between the lead federal investigative agencies: The U.S. Marshals Service is the primary investigative agency and handles about 60 percent of international fugitive pursuits, but the FBI also plays a major role, along with the Drug Enforcement Administration and other agencies. "It appears there is still some stovepipe culture in the federal agencies," Durbin said.

Dart said outside the meeting that Justice Department officials need to lay out clear directives showing local officials which of the myriad federal agencies they should deal with when they have evidence that a fugitive has crossed the border.

"Everybody needs to get their act together," Dart said. Right now, he said, the sheriffs "can go to the FBI or the U.S. marshals — but there's no rhyme or reason."

While the officials at Thursday's meeting focused on international fugitive apprehension problems in northern Illinois, Durbin noted afterward that a number of federal officials have told him there was a higher level of cooperation and effectiveness here than in many other parts of the country.

"Illinois is not the worst situation in the country," Durbin said. "This is a challenge across the nation."