

Government Orders

At headquarters in Ottawa RCMP members have developed national RCMP witness protection policy procedures and contacts to facilitate the changes that must be made within numerous federal government data banks when a witness or an informant receives a new identity.

The annual cost of the RCMP witness protection program is \$3.4 million. As my learned friend, the solicitor general, has already pointed out, no additional costs are expected as a result of the legislation. The average cost per case is \$30,000 and approximately 60 per cent of cases cost less than \$20,000.

At any given time there are approximately 80 to 100 people, including family members, in the program. The success of the RCMP source witness protection program speaks for itself. Of the large number of witnesses, informants and their families who have been relocated since the program began, none has come to any harm. It is difficult to establish precise conviction statistics for cases involving protected witnesses. However, based on available data, approximately 85 per cent to 90 per cent of cases involving witness protection result in convictions, usually because of the testimony of the protected person.

From my brief remarks I am sure the hon. members can appreciate how important the witness source protection program is as a law enforcement tool. There is no more devastating evidence than the firsthand testimony of a trusted accomplice exposing the inner workings of a criminal organization or that of a witness who has seen a serious crime take place and can identify the perpetrators. Whether a witness or an informant, these individuals are invaluable assets of the police and the judicial system.

[Translation]

That is why it is our responsibility, as legislators, to do everything possible to ensure that our national witness protection program is as efficient and effective as it can be. It is for this purpose that the government is introducing this bill.

• (1130)

The proposed legislation was drafted in consultation with all major stakeholders and after all issues had been thoroughly examined. In my view, it is particularly important to point out that police forces across the country were consulted. In 1992, a questionnaire was sent out to about 400 municipal and provincial police forces in the country.

Our goal was to assess how much protection witnesses were afforded, determine the types of offences being committed and the nature of the protection provided, examine the problems facing service users and recommend improvements. We also conducted a comprehensive review of witness protection programs in place in other countries, particularly the U.S., United Kingdom and Australia.

Bill C-78 incorporates the results of the analysis performed on the data collected and the lessons drawn from this extensive research. In short, this bill is the result of many years of research and effort and it will ensure that our national witness protection program remains modern and effective. Under the provisions of the bill, our program will continue to provide safe and effective support to witnesses under protection while at the same time remaining open and transparent.

Witness protection in itself will not check violent crime or organized crime. But it is nonetheless a major element of the investigative techniques available to law enforcement officials and a tool very useful to police in fighting against organized crime and major criminal activity in Canada. We must therefore make sure that it remains such a tool.

The solicitor general has already given the House the broad outlines of the bill and proposed changes to the RCMP's sources-witness protection program. All hon. members will agree that the need for such changes is crystal-clear. In conclusion then, I would like to echo the closing remarks made by the solicitor general and urge all hon. members to ensure the speedy passage of Bill C-78.

[English]

Ms. Shaughnessy Cohen (Windsor—St. Clair, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on Bill C-78. I sought the opportunity because over the past 15 years I have been active as a lawyer in the criminal justice system. As a lawyer I have worked with witnesses in court, as a defence counsel, as a crown prosecutor for the provincial Government of Ontario and as a crown prosecutor for the federal government.

On other occasions I have worked as counsel for witnesses who were involved in witness protection programs. I have had the opportunity to see firsthand what happens to a person, particularly a member of the public, who becomes a witness and to people in the past who became involved in our less formal former witness protection program. I have also seen what happens when a witness is intimidated or when an accused person or a person involved in crime attempts to intimidate a witness.

It is now past the time when we should come forward and set out some clear legislation, some clear rules and clear guidelines and regulations to deal with persons who find themselves in the very delicate and very dangerous position of being a witness and being subject to duress and penalty from those who would seek to quiet them.

Criminals have successfully utilized fear and intimidation of potential witnesses to avoid prosecution and punishment for their criminal acts. Individuals will go to great lengths to avoid conviction or to exact violent retribution from witnesses. We have recognized this. We have worked with this in the system for a long time. We now recognize that enforcement agencies need the support and the assistance of the public to further their investigations and to achieve success in their efforts to bring criminals to justice.