

FBI two years behind on computer system

Justice Dept. finds project is \$100M over budget and only half-finished

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USA TODAY**

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WASHINGTON — The FBI, which has struggled for years to modernize its outdated computer systems, is two years behind and \$100 million over budget on the installation of an electronic case-management system designed to streamline operations.

A review by the Justice Department's inspector general found that only half of the project's four-phase development had been completed, "inhibiting the FBI's ability to connect the dots" in its investigations.

"According to its original system plan, (the project) was to be fully completed by now," Inspector General Glenn Fine said Wednesday in a 28-page review. "We are also concerned that the longer the full implementation takes, the more likely it is that already-implemented hardware and software features will become obsolete."

The "Sentinel" system, budgeted at \$451 million, was to provide agents and analysts with a more efficient process to handle evidence, expand search capabilities and allow for automated review of documents.

"Sentinel's budget and schedule overruns affect the daily work of the FBI's 35,000 employees," the report concluded, adding that agents are now relying on a "time-consuming, paper-based system ... susceptible to errors."

The FBI criticized the Justice report, asserting that the inspector general "fails to credit the FBI with taking corrective action to keep (the project) on budget." To reduce costs and expedite the program, the FBI is planning to reduce the role of its outside contractor and assume direct management of the uncompleted work.

"The ... report expresses significant concerns about the FBI's new plan, yet it offers no alternative and recommends in part that we follow this course," FBI Associate Deputy Director Thomas Harrington said in a written statement.

Computer troubles have haunted the FBI for nearly a decade. In the hours after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, limited computer function forced agents to use overnight mail to distribute important information about the 19 hijackers to investigators in the field.

In 2005, the FBI abandoned its previous attempt at creating an electronic case-management system after spending \$170 million.

"The FBI's efforts to improve its case-management system have been riddled with error," Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said Wednesday.

"Years have been wasted, as well as millions in taxpayer dollars," Leahy said. "These stumbles continue to be alarming."

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