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“When Badges Become Targets: How Anti-Law Enforcement Rhetoric Fuels Violence Against Officers”

U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA). FLEOA is a national organization representing more than 33,000 federal criminal investigators, police officers, and law enforcement professionals. Our members perform a vital and unique role in protecting this nation. This includes ensuring lawful trade and commerce, stopping the spread of fentanyl and other dangerous substances from entering our communities, preventing terrorism and the proliferation of transnational criminal organizations, and protecting officials of all three branches of government both at home and abroad.

I have served in federal law enforcement for more than 34 years, decades spent not only enforcing the nation’s laws, but mentoring younger officers, supervising field operations, coordinating across agencies, serving as a senior executive and political appointee leading the U.S. Marshals Office here in the District of Columbia, and leading the United States’ global law enforcement initiatives with INTERPOL as the Director of INTERPOL Washington. I now proudly serve as FLEOA’s Executive Director, dedicated to advocating for the safety and well-being of the federal law enforcement professionals who protect and serve this nation.

Throughout my career, I have witnessed many shifts in policy, public sentiment, and national priorities. During these times of transition, the one constant has been the men and women who wear the badge and remain steadfast in their commitment to the Constitution and enforcing the laws enacted by Congress. Today, however, the environment in which these professionals serve is increasingly hostile, marked by rising levels of violence, threats against the lives of officers and their families, and online harassment. We saw evidence of this in last Wednesday’s brazen and premeditated ambush attack just blocks from the White House that claimed the life of West Virginia National Guard Specialist Sarah Beckstrom and left Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe critically wounded. Both had been sworn in less

than 24 hours prior to the attack to assist federal law enforcement and D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department in reducing violent crime and enhancing public safety in the nation's Capital. FLEOA mourns with the family of Specialist Beckstrom and offer our thoughts and prayers to Sgt. Wolfe and his family for a full and speedy recovery.

While the motive for last Wednesday's ambush attack is still under investigation at the time of this writing, the unfortunate reality is that it was not unique, nor will it be the last such attack on those who protect and serve our communities. And the title of today's hearing, "*When Badges Become Targets*," accurately captures the experience that far too many federal officers are forced to confront, and which is in part driven by increasingly hostile personal attacks that undermine their legitimacy and endangers their safety.

My testimony today will focus on the apolitical, oath-driven nature of federal law enforcement, the evolving threat landscape, the role that anti-law enforcement rhetoric plays in the increased threats to law enforcement officers and their families, the need for both accountability and protection, and recommendations for congressional action.

The Role of Federal Law Enforcement and the Presidential Mandate

Federal law enforcement is guided by a mission that is deliberately insulated from politics: to abide by the Constitution and enforce the laws that Congress writes. Presidents of both parties have relied on federal agencies to address urgent threats to public safety, and every officer is charged to carry out their responsibilities with neutrality, integrity, and professionalism.

Yet within these boundaries, it is common for Administrations to have different priorities when it comes to the allocation of resources, personnel, and enforcement activities to address pressing threats to public safety and national security. The most transformational changes in my career came during the George W. Bush Administration as a result of the heinous terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the passage of laws like the USA PATRIOT Act and the Homeland Security Act. Agencies across the government were realigned, moved between Cabinet agencies, and granted expanded authorities and missions. Federal law enforcement extended its traditional emphasis on enforcement of the criminal laws and crime prevention to include counterterrorism and became part of a global effort to reduce this nation's vulnerability to terrorism. And we saw walls between agencies break down and the prioritization of information and intelligence sharing between federal agencies and our state and local partners through entities such as the Joint Terrorism Task Forces. Under President Biden, federal agencies intensified operations targeting fentanyl trafficking across the U.S. – Mexico border and within domestic distribution networks. Each administration, faced with evolving threats, has directed

federal law enforcement resources accordingly. Similarly, President Trump has tasked federal agencies over the past year with strengthening enforcement efforts particularly against violent crime, organized criminal networks, transnational criminal organizations, and the trafficking of illicit fentanyl.

What does not change is the oath each officer swears, which is to support and defend the Constitution; to perform duties objectively, impartially, and with integrity; and to uphold the rule of law, regardless of which party controls the Executive Branch. When officers fail to meet this standard, there are robust mechanisms for oversight and discipline. Federal agencies maintain internal affairs offices, Inspectors General conduct independent reviews, and Congress exercises statutory oversight. Accountability is not an afterthought. It is a core pillar of the profession. And while these mechanisms help to enhance public trust in law enforcement, little is being done to enhance law enforcement's trust that they will be protected when the environment around them becomes increasingly dangerous.

A Rising and Dangerous Threat Environment

Over the past year, the threat environment facing federal officers has grown more volatile. While national crime data often aggregate local, state, and federal incidents, the overall trend is rising levels of violence against the nation's law enforcement officers, with the FBI reporting more than 85,000 assaults on law enforcement officers in 2024, a ten-year high.¹ Officers at all levels have also faced an alarming increase in ambush-style attacks.

According to data from the Justice Departments COPS Office and the Fraternal Order of Police, in 2024 alone, there were 62 ambush-style attacks resulting in 80 officers shot and 18 killed.²

Federal officers have not been exempted from violent and targeted attacks. They execute high-risk warrants, disrupt transnational criminal networks, investigate violent offenders, and interdict narcotics and weapons. These roles have historically put them in direct contact with individuals who are often heavily armed, increasingly desperate, and emboldened by anti-law enforcement narratives circulating online. The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial here in Washington, D.C. bears eternal witness to the dangers that law enforcement officers face on a daily basis, and the high cost of carrying out a sworn duty to protect and serve others.

But I would suggest that what we are seeing in 2025 is truly unprecedented. The polarization and politicization of federal law enforcement's role in enforcing the nation's

¹ “[FBI report: Violent crime fell in 2024, but assaults on officers reached 10-year high](#),” CNN.com (Aug. 5, 2025). Last visited Nov. 28, 2025.

² “[Law Enforcement Officers Shot in the Line of Duty: 2024 Year-End Summary](#),” Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice, April 2025. Last visited Nov. 28, 2025.

immigration laws and increasing public safety in major U.S. cities has placed law enforcement officers in greater physical jeopardy than any I have witnessed in my 34-year career. Just last week, the Department of Homeland Security reported a more than 1,150% increase in assaults and violence against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers this year compared to the same period in 2024.³ DHS also announced the arrest of a high school assistant principal from Virginia and his brother who were plotting to travel to Las Vegas to obtain weapons in a plot to attack ICE Agents and police officers.⁴ In October, ICE-Homeland Security Investigations arrested a Florida man who made online threats to kill ICE Agents, spewing hate-filled rhetoric online such as “Shoot the ICE Nazis dead.”⁵ Meanwhile, Mexican drug cartels have reportedly offered a “tiered” bounty system for the murder of ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers and have deployed spotters to provide the cartels with information on the movements of CBP and ICE personnel.⁶

But the threats now extend well beyond the physical:

- Doxing and digital harassment have escalated, with officers’ personal information including their home addresses, photographs, and family details, posted online in attempts to intimidate or retaliate.
- Targeted online campaigns often arise after routine enforcement actions, sometimes fueled by misinformation or deliberate mischaracterizations.
- Family members of officers report receiving threatening messages or being followed, a chilling and unacceptable development.

Federal officers have had to relocate their families, change established routines, and/or reduce their public presence due to credible threats – threats that, only a decade ago, would have been considered extreme outliers.

In one instance, three individuals were indicted on charges of illegally doxing an ICE agent after following the agent home and livestreaming their pursuit and posting the agent’s address online.⁷ In another case, a federal grand jury charged two individuals with

³ [“Sanctuary Politicians’ Rhetoric Fuels More than 1,150% Increase in Violence Against ICE Law Enforcement,”](#) Department of Homeland Security press release (Nov. 24, 2025). Last visited Nov. 26, 2025.

⁴ [“Virginia High School Assistant Principal and Brother Arrested for Plotting to Kill ICE Law Enforcement Officers,”](#) Dept. of Homeland Security press release (Nov. 26, 2025). Last visited Nov. 26, 2025.

⁵ [“HSI Arrests Florida Man Who Posted Death Threats Online to ICE Officers,”](#) Dept. of Homeland Security press release (Oct. 31, 2025). Last visited Nov. 26, 2025.

⁶ [“Cartels issuing bounties up to \\$50,000 for hits on ICE, CBP agents: DHS,”](#) ABC News (Oct. 14, 2025), last visited Nov. 26, 2025.

⁷ [“Federal Grand Jury Charges Three Women with Following ICE Agent Home from Work and Livestreaming His Home Address on Instagram,”](#) Dept. of Justice press release (Sept. 25 2025). Last visited Nov. 30, 2025.

knowingly transmitting threats to injure a DHS ICE deportation officer and his wife.⁸ Such events, once rare, are now disturbingly common.

The Impact of Rhetoric in Rising Threats Against Federal Law Enforcement

Criticism of law enforcement can be constructive. Law enforcement is a dynamic profession, not static, and is constantly evolving to better serve the goals of public safety and impartial enforcement of the nation's laws. We see that in the way we conduct investigations, utilizing an array of new tools and systems that were not in place even 10 years ago such as the increased use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to analyze vast amounts of data and help identify crime patterns. The personal safety of law enforcement has been enhanced as well, from improvements in bullet resistant body armor to new containment devices that prevent officers from being inadvertently exposed to fentanyl. The same is true for systems of accountability for law enforcement personnel. The widespread adoption of body worn cameras and multiplicity of social media platforms has added never before conceived means to address situations when law enforcement officers have been accused of misconduct or acting improperly.

Following the heinous death of George Floyd in 2020, FLEOA worked closely with both the first Trump Administration and then with the Biden Administration to address several reforms to law enforcement practices, policies, and protocols, including use-of-force. For federal law enforcement, these efforts resulted in reforms that struck the right balance between understanding the public need for accountability and the need to ensure all communities are safe and protected.

As we have seen over the years, criticism of law enforcement policies and practices can be constructive and lead to needed and positive reforms. But what we are witnessing now in terms of the rhetoric from some public personalities in traditional media and social media, and from some elected officials at every level of government is neither constructive nor beneficial. It is outright vilification.

We have seen the consequences of this type of vilification in politics in recent years, when policy disagreements seemingly rationalize violence as the only solution, and further an "us vs. them" mentality that has poisoned our political discourse. The attempted assassination of Justice Brett Kavanaugh in 2022, the 2025 targeted assassination of Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband, the assassination of Charlie Kirk, and the two assassination attempts last year on President Trump. These are all

⁸ ["Social Media Provocateurs Charged with Threatening to Harm Federal Agent and His Wife,"](#) Dept. of Justice press release (Oct. 7, 2025). Last visited Nov. 30, 2025.

examples of how hostile political rhetoric can escalate into lethal action, and why toning down, countering, and ultimately reducing incendiary rhetoric is essential to lowering the temperature of our politics and preventing future acts of violence.

When public figures in particular portray federal law enforcement as “the enemy,” or as participants in advancing a partisan political agenda, it degrades trust and fuels hostility. These characterizations blur the distinction between policy disagreements and the individuals sworn to carry out lawful directives. This rhetoric reverberates across social and traditional media, often morphing into personalized attacks, conspiracy theories, and calls for harassment against the men and women of law enforcement.

Federal law enforcement officers are not nameless, faceless automatons. They are parents, veterans, volunteers, and community members. Many serve in the very communities where they were raised. They shop in the same stores, attend the same schools, and share the same hopes as the people they protect. Reducing them to political caricatures is not only inaccurate, it is dangerous.

This is especially true when elected leaders use their status and microphones to cast suspicion upon or express contempt for law enforcement and unintentionally signal to hostile individuals that officers are legitimate targets. This erodes public safety and undermines cooperative policing efforts essential to addressing violent crime, drug trafficking, and homeland security threats.

Accountability, Professionalism, and Protection

Federal law enforcement welcomes accountability. It ensures the public’s trust and strengthens our institutions. But accountability must be paired with protection – protection from violence, intimidation, and harassment.

Officers who fear for their safety or that of their families cannot perform at their best. Morale declines, recruitment becomes more difficult, and retention suffers. Protecting law enforcement is not a partisan political exercise. It is a matter of national security. The threats we face, from fentanyl traffickers to violent offenders to transnational criminal organizations, grow more complex each year.

Over the past several years, federal agencies have also faced significant staffing challenges that pose a direct risk to officer safety, including difficulties in attracting highly qualified applicants and a looming retirement cliff of experienced officers. As recently as October 2023, OPM reported that roughly 34 percent (more than 45,000) of federal law enforcement officers are eligible to retire within the next 5 years. This is the post-9/11 generation, the brave men and women who, much like today, answered the call to help protect this nation.

Unfortunately, the current pay, benefits, and personnel structures disincentivize retention and put federal law enforcement agencies at a competitive disadvantage in recruiting top talent. In particular, the statutory provisions governing law enforcement retirement and compensation, while perhaps innovative when they were enacted in the 1980s and early 1990s, have become antiquated and have not kept pace with state and local governments. Federal law enforcement officers are also the only employees in the public or private sector who are entitled to overtime pay, can be required to work unlimited hours of overtime work, but can only be compensated up to an antiquated “cap” on overtime pay. This has led to widespread pay compression, especially in high cost of living areas to which our members are assigned, and harms retention of experienced officers.

The rise in attacks and assaults on federal law enforcement is occurring at a time when we are already facing a severe recruitment and retention crisis in nearly every agency. And many of these heroes are putting their lives on the line daily without even receiving adequate compensation. Now, more than ever, we need legislation that supports and protects our officers. That includes addressing the problems caused by the federal pay cap that arbitrarily limits the amount of overtime pay officers and agents can receive. This is one of the most serious personnel issues facing our profession because it greatly undermines morale, recruitment, and retention.

Legislative Recommendations to Strengthen Officer Safety

In light of the rapidly increasing threat environment faced by our nation’s federal, state, and local law enforcement officers, FLEOA has consistently worked with Members of Congress and other law enforcement stakeholder groups to prioritize the passage of legislation to enhance officer safety. Many of these have been around for years and unfortunately have not gained the widespread support or attention they deserve. That is why FLEOA urges Congress to consider the following actions to help protect and support our law enforcement officers who work every day to keep our communities safe:

1. Strengthen 18 U.S.C. § 111

This statute criminalizes assaulting or resisting federal officers. Congress should review potential enhancements or clarifications to ensure that serious attacks, especially those involving premeditation or online targeting, carry appropriate penalties. FLEOA spearheaded a similar effort in the 117th Congress to pass the “Jaime Zapata and Victor Avila Federal Officers and Employees Protection Act” which amend sections 111, 115, and 1114 of Title 18, U.S. Code, and is named after two hero ICE Agents who were victims of an ambush attack by a Mexican drug cartel in 2011 that claimed the life of Agent Zapata.

2. The “Protect and Serve Act” (H.R. 1551/S. 167)

This bipartisan bill would create federal penalties of up to 10 years for knowingly attempting to injure a law enforcement officer, and up to life in cases involving death or attempted murder. This measure has strong support among national law enforcement organizations.

3. The “Back the Blue Act” (H.R. 4310)

This legislation would expand federal protections for officers across all levels – federal, state, and local – and impose tough penalties on those who kill or attempt to kill law enforcement officers.

4. The “Blue Shield Privacy Act” (H.R. 4828)

This bill would enhance protections for federal law enforcement officers and their families against doxing by expanding what is considered "restricted personal information" for which it is illegal to share publicly to harm federal officers or their immediate family. Specifically, this bill would designate as "restricted personal information" items such as license plate numbers, biometric information, workplace address, school address, and GPS coordinates, making it punishable by up to 5 years in prison to share this information publicly for the purpose of threatening, intimidating, or inciting violence against a federal officer or their immediate family.

5. Strengthen 18 USC 912

This statute prohibits impersonating a federal officer while demanding or obtaining something of value in that pretended character. Congress should review potential enhancements by removing the requirement of a specific financial benefit.

Together, these measures would help deter violence, reinforce the seriousness of attacking law enforcement, and send a clear message that Congress stands behind the rule of law and those sworn to uphold it.

Conclusion

Federal law enforcement officers enforce the laws enacted by Congress – laws that protect our citizens, our borders, our communities, and our national security. They do so out of a deep sense of duty to the Constitution and to the American people.

Yet the rise in targeted violence and the corrosive rhetoric directed at these public servants have created an atmosphere that jeopardizes officer safety and erodes public trust. We cannot allow this trend to continue. Protecting those who protect us is an essential responsibility of this body.

I urge Congress to reaffirm its commitment to the men and women of federal law enforcement by strengthening protections, condemning harmful rhetoric, and ensuring that officers have the resources, respect, and legislative backing they need to continue their vital work.

Thank you for your time and dedication to this issue. I look forward to answering your questions.