

Appropriators backed a crime-fighting unit. DOJ closed it anyway.

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Attorney General Pamela Bondi testifies in June before a House Appropriations subcommittee on the Justice Department's fiscal 2026 budget request. (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call)

For months, there were signs that appropriators were not on board with a Trump administration plan to wipe out funding for a decades-old Justice Department program tasked with coordinating major drug-trafficking and transnational-crime investigations.

Republican-led spending proposals rejected the idea. A Senate report said eliminating the program's appropriations account would be "infeasible" without more consultation, while a House report touted the program's "demonstrated ability" to share information efficiently to "keep Americans safe."

During a September markup, veteran House appropriator Harold Rogers put it this way: "Our commitment to the work of the task forces can't be underestimated or understated."

The Justice Department disbanded it anyway.

The fate of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces is one example of how the Trump administration has bulldozed past Congress' appropriations power as it reorganizes the federal government to match the vision of the president, oftentimes with little to no meaningful public pushback from GOP lawmakers.

DOJ officials first ordered OCDETF resources be used for the Trump administration's immigration enforcement push, then transferred key operations and all of the program's cases to other offices or entities, according to DOJ documents and communications with Congress.

They told Congress the program would be "eliminated" and removed from the organizational chart, those documents state. The Trump administration casts the move not as a closure, but as a reorganization that funnels the agency's money directly to partner agencies to do investigations. The DOJ says it will save millions in "bureaucratic spending" and "ensure continued coordination and direction of high-level cases across multiple components."

Thomas Padden, a longtime OCDETF official who served as acting director during the closure process, [wrote](#) on Substack that the changes are among those that mean America "is left more vulnerable to organized crime threats."

The administration shifted the work into an unproven structure that places more emphasis on immigration offenses and human smuggling, wrote Padden, who left OCDETF at the end of September. The new model deprioritizes probes that include financial investigations and eliminates a central staffing infrastructure that ensured prosecutors and investigators worked together.

"I don't understand why an effective program like OCDETF would be eliminated when we have 43 years of proven success going after the most significant organized crime and drug-trafficking threats that the nation faces," Padden said in an interview.

The move also raises questions about congressional spending authority.

For the previous two fiscal years, Congress has directed \$547 million annually to the program. That funding rate was also included in the current continuing resolution, which runs through Jan. 30.

Democrats largely opposed that stopgap measure as well as a yearlong fiscal 2025 CR that they said handed over too much spending flexibility to the Trump administration. And all year, they've fought White House attempts to claw back or redirect money from purposes Congress intended in appropriations law.



Cartwright (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

Former Rep. Matt Cartwright, D-Pa., who previously led the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees DOJ funding, said that repurposing of funds is illegal and pointed to the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, which restricts the president’s ability to freeze or claw back appropriated money without congressional approval.

“I worked with presidents from both parties and served in both majority and minority in the House for 12 years and could not imagine DOJ taking this kind of unilateral action during my tenure,” Cartwright said.

“This is an unfortunate precedent for the institution of Congress,” he said. “I am disheartened to see members of Congress allowing themselves to be taken advantage of in this way.”

History of support

Many Americans probably haven’t heard of OCDETF, pronounced “oh-suh-def,” which billed itself as “an independent component” of DOJ and “the largest anti-crime task force in the country.”

But they have probably heard of some of the tens of thousands of investigations it helped coordinate, such as efforts to take down Colombian cartels in the 1980s and violent Mexican cartels in the 1990s.



Guzman, also known as “El Chapo,” pictured in Mexico City, Mexico, on Jan. 8, 2016. (Daniel Cardenas/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

In 2019, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, who DOJ dubbed as a principal leader of the Mexico-based organized crime syndicate known as the Sinaloa Cartel, was sentenced to life in prison after an OCDETF-involved investigation that included numerous law enforcement agencies.

The government [said](#) the Sinaloa Cartel was responsible for “importing and distributing more than a million kilograms of cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine and heroin in the United States.”

Established under the Reagan administration in 1982 as part of President Ronald Reagan’s initiatives to respond to drug trafficking and organized crime, OCDETF had federal partners within DOJ and the departments of Homeland Security, Treasury, Labor and State, as well as the U.S. Postal Service and state and local law enforcement, according to a June 2025 Congressional Research Service [report](#).

The program had strike forces around the U.S. to coordinate prosecutions and investigations. The OCDETF director managed the processes for identifying priority drug trafficking and organized crime threats, according to the CRS report.

Padden, the former acting director, said the Reagan administration wanted to overcome “stovepipes,” where intelligence information within one agency is not shared with others.

“These agencies had little incentive to share what they knew, and gaps between their differing authorities, and the purpose for which each agency is funded by Congress, made it challenging to conduct joint investigations of criminal networks,” Padden wrote. “These investigative challenges still exist today.”

The program’s central staffing and separate funding stream from Congress broke the stovepipes, Padden wrote, and agencies had to work together with prosecutors to build cases if they wanted to obtain the additional resources that the program provided.

In a partisan Washington, the program has received funding under both Democrat and Republican control. For years, funding has been consistent at around \$550 million per year, though both chambers in their fiscal 2026 bills have proposed cuts.

The first Trump administration embraced OCDETF, and [an executive order](#) from President Donald Trump in 2017 stipulated that the program’s mission should cover various kinds of transnational organized crime — human trafficking, corruption and intellectual-property theft.

New operation



Blanche (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

But within weeks of Trump's second inauguration, DOJ leadership would look to OCDETF to fulfill Trump's campaign promise to crack down on immigration enforcement.

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche sent a memo March 6 to establish an initiative called "Operation Take Back America" that would in part use OCDETF resources to "implement core policy objectives" established by Trump.

Among those priorities, Blanche told the department the operation would require OCDETF to "surge existing resources" to address enforcement priorities, including stopping illegal immigration.

He said the operation would include "investigations and prosecutions relating to immigration enforcement, such as cases involving obstruction of immigration objectives by sanctuary jurisdictions."

All OCDETF-funded personnel and strike forces must contribute to the operation, Blanche wrote, and OCDETF-funded federal prosecutors "must devote a significant number of their weekly hours to the operation."

The memo also said the operation would help fulfill a portion of a Trump [executive order](#) from January focused on “Protecting the American People Against Invasion,” which ordered the creation of Homeland Security Task Forces.

Trump’s executive order described the role of the new Homeland Security Task Forces in a way that largely overlapped the tasks previously given to OCDETF’s strike forces, but added a new focus on immigration issues.

“The objective of each HSTF is to end the presence of criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and transnational criminal organizations throughout the United States, dismantle cross-border human smuggling and trafficking networks, end the scourge of human smuggling and trafficking, with a particular focus on such offenses involving children, and ensure the use of all available law enforcement tools to faithfully execute the immigration laws of the United States,” the executive order states.

In a separate memo later in March, Blanche wrote that “Reorganizing OCDETF” was among many potential reorganizations the DOJ proposed in response to an executive order implementing Trump’s Department of Government Efficiency workforce optimization initiative.

Two months later, the Trump administration asked Congress in its fiscal 2026 budget request to eliminate OCDETF funding altogether. Instead of millions in funding for OCDETF to dole out to agencies working on big investigations, the White House proposed funding go directly to the appropriations of its partner DOJ components, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration, FBI, U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. attorneys, the department’s Criminal Division and the department’s National Security Division.

OCDETF operations would instead be led by a task force director in the Office of the Deputy Attorney General, which “returns to past practice and will allow the Department to ensure continued coordination and direction of high-level cases across multiple components.”

The arrangement would allow the department to “more directly and efficiently control resources that support investigations into drug trafficking and organized crime,” the White House budget appendix stated.

Then, in a notification signed July 9, the Justice Department again told Congress that it “plans to eliminate OCDETF as a standalone \$547 million appropriation.” Instead, the Trump administration wanted \$500 million to go directly to other components as the DOJ “will close the OCDETF Executive Office” by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year.

Rejected request

Around the time of the July notification, GOP-led Appropriations subcommittees in the House and Senate released separate fiscal 2026 Commerce-Justice-Science spending bills that included funding for OCDETF as a stand-alone funding line, even if at a reduced funding level.

The Senate Appropriations Committee in mid-July approved a bill that would reduce OCDETF funding by about 2 percent, or \$10 million. But they made their thoughts clear in a report that accompanied the bill, a document that is often seen as guidance for agencies on congressional intent.

“The OCDETF appropriations account is primarily a reimbursement account and its elimination is infeasible without further consultations between the Committee and the Department,” the Senate report states, adding their proposal “continues to support the OCDETF program.”

Though the House bill included a 27 percent cut, to \$400 million, as part of the GOP’s push to reduce government spending, the bill also kept OCDETF as a separate item.

Still, by late July, OCDETF had effectively shut down its investigative and prosecutorial operations, Padden said, as Blanche ordered the program to transfer its 5,000-plus cases to what would become the Homeland Security Task Forces.



Morelle (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

During a Sept. 10 full-committee markup on the House bill, Rep. Joseph D. Morelle, D-N.Y., offered an amendment to boost OCDETF's current funding and prohibit money from being used to eliminate or dismantle the program.

Rogers, the longtime appropriator who leads the House Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations Subcommittee, cited fiscal concerns in opposing the amendment. But he highlighted the significance of the line-item funding remaining intact.

"Equally important is the fact the House C-J-S fiscal year bill retains the task forces on its own appropriation," the Kentucky Republican said. "Our commitment to the work of the task forces can't be underestimated or understated."



Rogers (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

Additionally, the panel adopted a Rogers-introduced amendment that added language into the report that accompanied the spending bill. It inserted language that the committee "commends the Department's work regarding OCDETF and its demonstrated ability to share information efficiently and effectively across agencies to keep Americans safe."

"The Committee directs OCDETF to continue its multi-agency coordinated effort to disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal networks that present distinct transnational organized crime threats to the United States," the language read.

Winding down

A little more than a week after that House markup, a DOJ official on Sept. 18 signed a notification to the Senate that OCDETF and two other components “will be eliminated.”

The notification said that an estimated two dozen OCDETF executive office employees would receive layoff notifications and referenced plans to have no employees onboard in that office by the end of that month.

The program would release its leased space at the Government Accountability Office building, the DOJ said, and a notification would be sent to Congress in the fall to remove OCDETF from the department organizational chart.

“OCDETF will not require pending or future appropriations,” the notification states.

When he left at the end of September, Padden said the plan was for there to no longer be any OCDETF employees by the end of October.

Meanwhile, after the longest partial shutdown in history this fall, the government reopened under a continuing resolution that lasts through Jan. 30 and requires the current rate of funding to continue for OCDETF. One congressional staffer saw this possibility early in the process and asked the Justice Department about it, according to records filed in an unrelated lawsuit.

Preemptively disbanding OCDETF by Sept. 30 “would render the Department unable to continue activities under a Continuing Resolution or other FY 26 Appropriations Act that specifically funds such activities,” the congressional staffer noted.

The department, in the records, said it recognized “that we may need to reassess the situation once our appropriations are enacted.”

And if funding was provided for OCDETF under a continuing resolution or a full-year appropriation, the department said it would “continue to execute the funding consistent with its underlying purposes, including providing it to law enforcement agencies. This can be accomplished without the existing OCDETF infrastructure.”

A Justice Department spokesman, in response to written questions, said the DOJ “has not ‘closed’ OCDETF as you suggest.”

Resources that OCDETF previously provided to law enforcement organizations will still be provided to those agencies, the spokesman said, and all cases have been transferred to Homeland Security Task Forces, which is “a priority of this administration.”

The move also will save millions in “bureaucratic spending” and “allows for improved interagency integration, operational flexibility, and more legal tools to bear, while mitigating weaknesses attributed to competing interests of non-unified investigations.”

The spokesman did not respond to additional questions. Neither the full House nor Senate has passed the stand-alone C-J-S spending bills approved by their respective appropriations committees earlier in the year.

A White House spokesperson, in a statement, called the Homeland Security Task Forces a “landmark achievement.”

“The American people are safer today because of the HSTFs — and they’re just getting started,” the spokesperson said.

Congressional response

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., the ranking member on the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees DOJ funding, wrote a letter in September to Attorney General Pamela Bondi that slammed the move away from OCDETF.

“The Department seems to have relinquished its role as the agency leading the country’s fight against illicit narcotics trafficking and the worst of the worst cartels and organized crime syndicates,” Van Hollen wrote.



Van Hollen (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

The department and Congress have a history of working together on controversial spending plan proposals, Van Hollen wrote. But under the Trump administration, the government moves forward “regardless of the law and clear Congressional intent to do otherwise.”

“I am disappointed by the deterioration of this relationship,” Van Hollen said.

Morelle filed a bill to prevent the disbanding of OCDETF. “The administration, it appears, has no interest in what Congress thinks,” Morelle said in an interview. “Members of Congress I think on both sides support it. I’m going to continue to fight for it.

Unlike the denouncements from Democrats, their Republican counterparts have not publicly raised alarm bells.

In separate statements, the top two Republican lawmakers on subcommittees overseeing Justice Department appropriations did not criticize the move to shutter the program.

Rogers, who voiced support for OCDETF at the September markup, said he’s spoken to the DOJ about fighting transnational criminal networks, and that the House funding bill “reflects our shared intent to protect this great nation.”

“The Trump Administration has successfully ramped up our homeland defense, and we’ll continue to work together on reorganization efforts that lead to reducing foreign threats and making America safer,” Rogers said in a statement.



Moran (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call)

Kansas GOP Sen. Jerry Moran likewise avoided criticizing the administration’s decision to push past congressional intent on OCDETF.

Instead, he said “joint task forces” have been successful in investigating criminal activity. His office said his statement referred to joint task forces whose work was previously reimbursed through OCDETF, but is now being carried out through the Homeland Security Task Forces.

“I will continue working with my colleagues on both the House and Senate appropriations committees on how to best align the budget with the administration’s goals while making certain the work of the law enforcement task forces can continue,” he said.

Moving forward

The Homeland Security Task Forces were fully implemented in September.

As part of the HSTF framework, the FBI and Homeland Security Investigations, which is a part of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, formed the National Coordination Center, which provides the task forces with intelligence and operational support, according to the FBI.

At an event in October, Trump touted the work of the Homeland Security Task Forces, saying it had seized deadly drugs and illegal firearms.

Trump at the event said he directed the creation of the HSTF to bring together “all federal, state and local partners to achieve the national policy goal of eliminating the cartel presence in America once and for all.”

“It’s early and the results are spectacular,” Trump said.

But Padden wrote in his online post that comments at the event were “misleading, self-serving, and unfair,” as the HSTF received cases that had been initiated and developed by OCDETF task forces under the Biden administration.

“The statistics quoted during that White House event should be attributed appropriately,” Padden wrote. “The Trump Administration did not invent interagency cooperation, it has been working for decades.”

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