

Stopping Gun Violence: ATF to Open Office in Northern New Jersey

The following news article was published in the Philadelphia Inquirer on August 22, 2007, announcing that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms has agreed to establish a field office in New Jersey.

ATF will open an office in Newark

The agency will focus on tracking guns used in N.J. crimes, easing the load of its Phila. and N.Y. staffs.

By Maria Panaritis

Philadelphia Inquirer Trenton Bureau

In a move expected to bolster New Jersey's ability to track illegal firearms, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms has agreed to establish its first field office in the state this year, federal officials confirmed yesterday.

The new office will put all gun-tracing and other requests from New Jersey law enforcement investigators into a single ATF office dedicated to the Garden State. It will be in Newark and a director will be named Oct. 1, officials said.

The opening of a New Jersey field office marks the end of a split bureaucratic system in which requests for investigative assistance have been handled by ATF field offices in Philadelphia and New York. New Jersey officials have been dissatisfied with the current system because their requests - roughly 3,000 last year - are juggled by offices already dealing with investigations in two of the 10 largest cities in the nation.

Creating a single office dedicated only to New Jersey is expected to streamline operations: Every time the ATF tracks a gun, patterns of illegal interstate gun trafficking will more readily emerge and be easily shared with local police, said ATF Special Agent John Hageman, spokesman for the Philadelphia Field Division, which oversees South Jersey.

Federal prosecutors in New Jersey would also be better positioned to build cases by dealing with a single ATF office and leadership team.

"I think they'll have better intelligence on where the crime guns are coming from," said Tom Stankiewicz, ATF assistant special agent in charge in Philadelphia.

Federal officials said the ATF's decision to open the field office was made before the killings of three college students in Newark earlier this month that prompted calls for a firearms crackdown.

"Our work in getting this office brought to New Jersey started several years ago," said U.S. Rep. Steve Rothman, a Democrat from Hudson County who represents Jersey City.

Rothman said the timing with the execution-style slayings, though coincidental, should nonetheless reassure the public.

"Given the terribly tragic shootings in Newark," Rothman said, "there is some comfort in letting the community know that this new field office from the ATF will be opening around the first of October."

Public outcry after the grisly killings prompted Gov. Corzine to hold a news conference last week at which he announced a program to increase the ATF's crimefighting role in New Jersey.

Under that plan, state officials have signed an agreement with the ATF to enable investigators in police departments across New Jersey to connect electronically with the ATF's gun-tracking system.

That would eliminate the time-consuming paper requests some departments make.

It also is expected to help achieve another goal: Persuading police to send information about all guns used in New Jersey crimes to the ATF for tracing. Currently, an estimated 30 percent are reported to the ATF, state officials said.

A quarter of all guns submitted to the ATF for tracing last year by New Jersey investigators were originally purchased out of state, according to the ATF. Pennsylvania is among the handful of states where a large number of guns used in New Jersey crimes were purchased, ATF data show.

Such interstate firearms data and a general increase in violent crime prompted Rothman and fellow Democratic U.S. Rep. Donald M. Payne of Newark to push for an ATF field office.

Their efforts began in 2002.

Rothman said a goal was to "identify the gun shops along the Eastern Seaboard, primarily, that are the source of illegal guns that make their way [onto] New Jersey's streets."

In a letter dated Monday, acting ATF Director Michael Sullivan told Rothman the new field office would initially be run out of ATF facilities in West Paterson, N.J.

Rothman said the permanent field office would be situated in Newark. Staffing will be determined later in the year.

In his letter, Sullivan said the ATF was also considering whether to establish a violent-crime impact team in Newark.

These teams target high-crime areas.

"We have experienced a dramatic increase in violent crime throughout New Jersey involving gangs," Rothman said.

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