

Officials call for Harvey inquiry

Durbin, Kirk, Kelly target federal role in politics, police issues

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TRIBUNE REPORTER MATTHEW WALBERG CONTRIBUTED.

Federal lawmakers on Tuesday called for a review of Justice Department actions — including measures that helped re-elect a controversial mayor — in a suburb the Tribune recently showed stood out for its high crime and subpar policing.

The lawmakers also pressed for more details on what federal prosecutors are doing to help reduce a violent crime rate in Harvey that continually tops those of hundreds of suburbs in the Chicago area.

In a letter sent Tuesday, U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk and U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly asked the Justice Department's inspector general to review actions by two wings of the department that were highlighted by the Tribune.

And in a separate letter Tuesday, Kelly joined U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin in asking the U.S. attorney's office in Chicago to explain its actions.

The Tribune reported that records show an undercover FBI operation aided the re-election of Harvey Mayor Eric Kellogg in 2007. Then, a civil rights investigation found problems in the Police Department in 2012, but Justice officials did not use their full authority to force reform.

"Harvey's citizens — like all citizens — must be confident in the honesty and trustworthiness of their government officials and law enforcement," said the letter by Kirk, Illinois' Republican senator, and Kelly, a Democrat whose district includes Harvey.

The letters came days after Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart began pushing for authority to intervene in troubled suburbs such as Harvey. Citing the Tribune findings, Dart said more must be done to demand accountability from the suburb's leaders. That proposal is awaiting consideration by the County Board.

At the federal level, Kelly told the Tribune on Tuesday that the problems in Harvey need a deeper investigation.

"There are many, many good people in Harvey," Kelly said. "They deserve to feel confident in their government and their police force, and they deserve good government."

The lawmakers said their questions were prompted by a three-part Tribune series, published this month, that showed how Harvey residents face a stark combination of a high violent crime rate and few arrests, unmatched even in Chicago's most dangerous neighborhoods.

The series found botched casework in a Police Department riddled with officers who have controversial pasts. It also showed how state and federal officials ignored and enabled Harvey's leaders in ways that may have worsened the plight of residents.

Regarding the undercover FBI operation, the Tribune revealed records that show an agent, using the alias Carlos Vargas, formed a political committee called The Harvey Good Government Group 2007. The committee reported about \$140,000 coming from Vargas, with the money being spent on election-related activities.

The Tribune found several fliers from the election that promoted Kellogg and show they were paid for by the political committee.

The FBI agent was at the time undercover as a manager of a strip club in Harvey, records show. His role at the club ended after he lured local officers to act as security on fake drug deals. Fifteen officers were charged, including some from Harvey, one of whom was close to Kellogg.

The FBI later acknowledged it asked that Harvey officer to cooperate against Kellogg, but the officer told the Tribune he declined.

Officials from the FBI and U.S. attorney's office have declined to address the Tribune's questions about the political committee, other than to say that government money was not used and that they followed all the rules for such investigations.

Federal lawmakers want to know more.

Kirk and Kelly asked the Justice Department's inspector general to take a closer look, saying: "The use of federal resources to influence elections in communities where criminal investigations are ongoing warrants special scrutiny."

Kelly and Durbin — Illinois' Democratic senator who holds the second-highest post in the Senate — asked U.S. Attorney Zachary Fardon to "explain the law enforcement purpose" of the political committee, who approved it and who supplied the money.

The Democrats also asked Fardon to detail what his office is doing to combat crime in Harvey, and whether the office has assessed any improvements there after the three-year civil rights investigation found "serious deficiencies" in police operations. Their letter said they hoped more federal resources would be used to fight crime across the Chicago area, including in Harvey. "We urge you to use the resources available to bring some relief from violent crime to the citizens of Harvey," the letter said, "and to ensure that the actions of federal law enforcement do not contribute to the challenges facing Harvey."

The U.S. attorney's office in Chicago declined to comment.

Kellogg and his police chief have argued that crime has lessened, the department has made reforms and the suburb is trying to weather difficult financial times. The mayor has declined to answer questions about the 2007 election and the FBI agent's committee's role in it. His office did not respond to requests for comment on the letters.



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