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Federal Diary

Stephen Barr, Columnist

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Border Protection Stretched Thin at Key West

By [Stephen Barr](#)

Tuesday, May 16, 2006; Page D04

Yesterday was a typical day for *Phil Teitsma*, a Customs and Border Protection supervisor at Key West, Fla. He got a call about 7 a.m. from the Coast Guard telling him that two crew members of a speedboat had been detained after they were spotted dropping five people off on an uninhabited island near the Florida coast.

Teitsma started to arrange for CBP officers to formally arrest the two boaters, but the local Border Patrol office said it would take over and seek possible prosecution on charges of alien smuggling. Teitsma did not object.

"I will gladly let them do it," he said. "I don't have the overtime."

Suzanne Trevino, a CBP spokeswoman, said that is not the case. CBP managers have been told to schedule officers more efficiently and to stay within their budgets, "but they can work overtime," she said. Teitsma sees it differently -- "that's accurate as far as it goes" -- and said he has been told to adhere to "strict guidelines" that do not allow overtime.

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These are frustrating times at the Homeland Security Department. Supervisors in many field offices are working hard but think they do not have adequate staff and budgets to do their jobs. "We are not able to accomplish what the country would expect us to do," Teitsma said.

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As a CBP field supervisor, Teitsma juggles priorities and coordinates activities with other parts of Homeland Security, such as the Border Patrol, Coast Guard and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He sees his territory as just as vulnerable to illegal immigration as the southern border, the focus of political debate in Washington.

The CBP station at Key West has 12 officers, including a port director, an agriculture specialist and Teitsma. On most days, nine officers cover a zone that stretches from the Dry Tortugas, about 70 miles offshore, to Marathon, about 45 miles to the east of Key West.

Authorities seize about 7 percent of the drugs being smuggled through that part of the Florida keys and capture about 50 percent of the illegal immigrants in that area, Teitsma said.

"If you are a private-boat owner and know the system . . . all you have to do is pick up your load and bring it on in, tie up to your private dock," he said. "Who knows? Twenty migrants on board or 20 bales of marijuana? You think we've got border security?"

In theory, the CBP station at Key West should have 16 officers, but the resort community has a high cost of living that makes it especially difficult to recruit and retain officers, Teitsma said. Funding for the four unfilled jobs at Key West has been turned over to the Miami CBP office, which oversees a larger seaport. "It makes sense on a geographic basis, but it doesn't make sense for me," he said.

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The Key West station, in addition to port inspection, is responsible for an airport and military facilities -- what Teitsma calls "a lot of varied traffic" that includes drug smugglers, international tourists and Cubans who journey by sea to America in hopes of a better life.

Teitsma, 58, has worked at Key West for almost 11 years. He also worked a year as a revenue officer for the Internal Revenue Service and served in the military, including two combat tours in Vietnam. He was a member of the American Federation of Government Employees, but left the union three years ago when he became a supervisor.

He has seen the ups and downs of the 2003 merger that created Homeland Security, he said. In particular, he worries when CBP officers escort prisoners to a way station near the midpoint of the keys, where immigration detention officers from Miami pick them up for further processing. The Key West officers often transport their prisoners in a Jeep that has no radio, and some officers guarding prisoners do not have state-of-the-art protective vests, Teitsma said. The officers, he said, rely on their personal cell phones in the event of a problem or a delay.

"I need some help," he said. "I've got almost 38 years of government service, and I'll work 16 hours a day and weekends, whatever I need to get the job done. But I can't. I need a team to work with, and I don't have it."

Stephen Barr's e-mail address is sbarrs@washpost.com. Please join him for a discussion of federal employee and retiree issues at noon Wednesday on Federal Diary Live at washingtontimes.com.

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