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WASHINGTON — Police stations operating out of temporary trailers. An evidence room housed in the back of an 18-wheeler truck. A makeshift crime lab set up at a nearby university.

New Orleans law enforcement officials and Louisiana's two senators on Wednesday painted a picture of a crippled justice system to a Senate Judiciary Committee trying to get to the bottom of the city's violent-crime wave.

Blame for the highest per capita murder rate in the nation was attributed to everything from a lack of federal funding to dysfunction in the justice system that serves New Orleans. But all agreed that the broken system must be improved.

"To me it's just unbelievable," said U.S. Sen. Benjamin Cardin, D-Md., a committee member. "I don't think it's acceptable to work under these conditions."

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., told the committee that the violent crime situation in New Orleans is paralyzing the city.

"Every murder has been heartbreaking for the families and has struck fear in the community," Landrieu said.

Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Conn., blamed the Bush administration for the increase of violent crime across the nation. Bush cut COPS grants, which under the Clinton administration provided funding for cities to hire more police officers, Leahy said.

Violent crime reached record lows in the 1990s.

Leahy noted that the 161 New Orleans murders in 2006 were 30 percent higher per capita than any other city in the nation. And the city's 92 murders this year has set it on a pace to break 200. Though dozens of the crimes have been solved, only one has resulted in a conviction, Leahy said.

And only four of the 11 jails serving the city have reopened,

he said.

“The COPS program has been cut to send police money to Baghdad,” Leahy said.

On the other hand, U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., called the administration’s assistance to New Orleans “unprecedented.” In addition to the federal government recently providing \$50 million for Gulf Coast justice systems, including \$24.5 million for New Orleans, federal agencies from the FBI to customs agents have aided the city.

Vitter called for reforms to the city police department and the District Attorney’s Office.

“This problem is a local crime problem,” Vitter said. “Fundamentally, these problems pre-existed (Hurricane Katrina.)”

U.S. Attorney James Letten attributed the violent-crime wave to drug dealers who have infiltrated the city. About 2,100 of those arrested since the start of the year have been able to get out on bail, Letten said.

Senators address N.O. crime wave

The violent-crime testimony Wednesday ran counter to a report issued by the Metropolitan Crime Commission last week that says city police and prosecutors are putting too much of their limited manpower into jailing people on minor offenses. More than half of the city’s 5,000 arrests in the first three months of the year were for municipal and traffic violations, the report says.

Deputy Police Superintendent Anthony Cannatella disputed the commission’s findings.

“The Metropolitan Crime Commission should come to the Police Department to get the right statistics,” he said.

Cannatella told the committee that the department is still reeling from the loss of 500 officers from its pre-hurricane strength of 1,700. Morale in the department is low because of the makeshift working conditions, he said.

“It’s really demoralizing,” Cannatella said. “When you go to work, you expect to work in a decent atmosphere.”

“The city police department is tired,” he said. “We haven’t had a break since Hurricane Katrina.”

The department needs help in multiple areas, Cannatella said.

“Everybody says ‘Chief, what is the one thing that can get you up and running?’ ” Cannatella said. “There is no one thing. There are a lot of things.”

During a break in the hearing, Cannatella told reporters the city could use as much federal aid as possible. Arguing over whether the problem is local or federal doesn’t help, he said.

“We’re chasing our tails,” he said. “There has to be federal help; that’s the only way we’re going to do it.”

Before dismissing the witness panel, Leahy delivered a message to Cannatella:

“When you go back, tell the men and women of your department that I’m proud of them.”

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