

## The Washington Post

# Use of private security guards at government buildings comes under scrutiny

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There's a saying among some private security guards in the Washington region: "There's no security in security."

Poor job security and the potential dangers that come with protecting government buildings make it a risky line of work, said guards interviewed this week.

Unlike officers with the Pentagon Force Protection Agency who gunned down shooter John Patrick Bedell last week, most security guards at federal buildings in the Washington region are employed by private firms that have contracts with the Federal Protective Service.

The FPS, part of the Department of Homeland Security, provides security at more than 9,000 federal buildings across the country and uses about 15,000 contract security guards to support about 1,200 officers, inspectors and administrative staffers, according to agency officials. A House hearing Tuesday will focus on the FPS's future and its response to a 2009 Government Accountability Office investigation that exposed security gaps at 10 major federal buildings. The GAO report also faulted the FPS for inconsistent training and

poor oversight of private guards.

Next month, Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.) plans to introduce legislation that addresses the agency's future and broader threats and security measures at all civilian and military facilities, aides said.

FPS officials said in a statement that it has increased both overt and covert inspections of security posts, as well as its oversight of contract guards. In response to GAO concerns with the training and qualification of those guards, the agency said it has reviewed all contract guard certification and qualification records.

But the agency's current arrangement leads to an odd mix of public- and private-sector workers who frequently

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fight turf wars and disagree on lines of authority, both private and federal guards said.

Some contract guards permanently stationed at a location can believe they have a stronger understanding of a site's security threats than FPS officers and inspectors who make infrequent visits to perform law enforcement duties, review building security plans and train tenants about security threats.

"We've gained minimal respect over the years, but we're still looked down on," said one guard, who asked that his name be withheld. "We're on the front lines. Being on the front lines, we need to be seen as essential and treated as essential."

The guard, who has worked at federal facilities in suburban Maryland for more than 15 years, asked for anonymity for fear of retribution from his employer and the FPS.

"You never know what to expect day to day," said another guard, who also requested anonymity for similar reasons. "It can be health problems, domestic problems. Ex-husbands show up to see their wives in the lobby," the guard said. FPS officers may respond to incidents, he said, but contractors are usually the first point of contact.

The guard has worked at federal sites in downtown Washington and suburban Maryland for 10 years. Private guards are required to have first-aid and CPR training and must be recertified by the FPS each year.

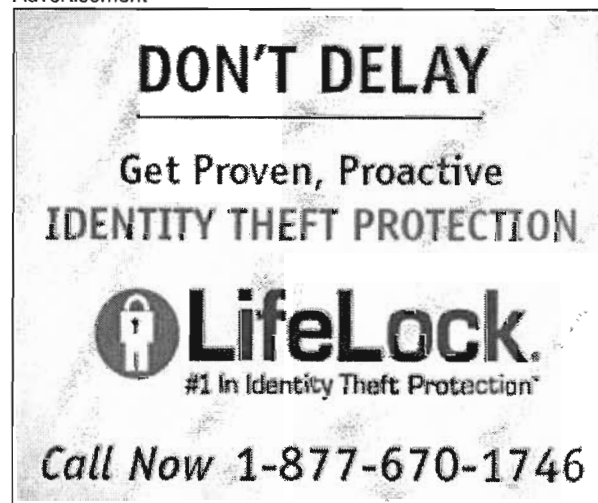
John Childs III, an FPS K-9 inspector and regional vice president for American Federation of Government Employees Local 918, discounted the concerns of the guards interviewed.

"It's just sometimes [contract guards] think they have more authority than we do, and that's not the case," Childs said. But the tensions would disappear if the FPS federalized or "insourced" the contract guards, he said.

"If they worked for FPS, things would be probably smoother," Childs said.


Childs and the contract guards did agree

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on that point. They said Congress and the Obama administration need to federalize private guards or establish stronger guidelines for the private forces.


"There really are no federal standards for security guards," said David Wright, president of Local 918 and an FPS inspector based in Kansas City. AFGE Local 918 represents FPS workers nationwide.

"These individuals should be trained at the federal level, and we think that they should be federal police officers," he said.

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