

Congress becomes object of post-9/11 reform effort

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WASHINGTON -- After securing sweeping changes of the nation's intelligence apparatus, security advocates started pressing Congress yesterday to revamp itself to better safeguard the country against a repeat of 9/11.

"The work of the Congress in reforming its own institutions is unfinished," said Lee Hamilton, the former vice chairman of the Sept. 11 commission, whose recommendations issued last summer spurred the overhaul effort.

Hamilton, joined by lawmakers and some of those who lost loved ones Sept. 11, 2001, urged Congress to junk a system that has the Department of Homeland Security answering to an estimated 88 committees and subcommittees.

"That's a recipe for chaos," Hamilton said.

Republican leaders in the House have offered a rule change that would make permanent its now-temporary Homeland Security Committee, but critics claim the proposal is watered down by the fine print.

Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) urged fellow Republicans to support further amendments offered by New York lawmaker Peter King transferring more authority to the homeland security panel.

But Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), the powerful chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, is urging colleagues to reject the King amendments. He argues King's moves would jeopardize critical law enforcement work and civil liberties by switching responsibility for immigration to a panel with little experience in such matters.

Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) said he fears leaders of his party are trying to cut deals on the homeland security issue in exchange for changes they want to make in House ethics rules.

"It's great to have a debate as long as we don't screw the American people in the process," Shays said.

Members of the 9/11 Family Steering Committee, which played a critical role in pushing last year's reforms, stood before a chart showing a tangled mass of lines of authority around the Department of Homeland Security.

"I beseech Congress to go back to the drawing board," said Abraham Scott, whose wife was killed at the Pentagon.

Another group, 9/11 Families for a Secure America, spoke in New York to urge lawmakers to live up to their promise to prioritize immigration enforcement and impose stricter national standards for driver's licenses.

"No matter what is done with intelligence reform, unless we have secure borders it's a halfway job and not worth doing," said Peter Gadiel of northern Connecticut, whose son James died at the World Trade Center.

In December, Congress passed a compromise intelligence reform bill that placed a director of national intelligence over the CIA. President Bush has yet to nominate someone to the post.

The CIA remains in charge of collecting human intelligence and analyzing all intelligence.

The new law also provides for wiretapping of "lone wolf" terrorists operating without clear ties to a particular terror network, and increases the number of full-time border patrol agents by 2,000 per year for five years.

The changes are the most far-reaching to the U.S. intelligence bureaucracy in nearly 60 years.

The Sept. 11 commission said the system created after World War II to deal with Cold War-era threats was not effective against the new danger of small cells within global terrorist networks.