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Congress cuts police grants
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WASHINGTON -- State and local law enforcement agencies likely will be seeking slices of a much smaller pie this year when it comes to one of their favorite, most flexible federal grant programs.

Many agencies have come to rely on the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant program to support anti-drug task forces, special operations and community outreach efforts.

But President Bush opposes the program as inefficient, and Congress agreed in December to cut the program's funding by two-thirds.

Nearly \$500 million intended to make up for those cuts was included in a supplemental spending measure approved by the Senate earlier this year. However, the House removed that money before passing its version of the legislation on Thursday.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said he was disappointed by that move.

"The administration let down local law enforcement, and the Congress has now -- irresponsibly -- failed to correct this mistake," Nelson said Friday.

He said the cuts in the grant program "adversely affect rural areas at a time when fighting devastating drugs like meth is critical."

The grant program has helped Nebraska establish nine drug task forces and one statewide task force.

Nelson said those task forces last year were responsible for 4,380 arrests, as well as the seizure of tons of illegal drugs and more than \$1.3 million in cash and goods.

The state crime commission predicts that as many as three dozen investigators' jobs are in jeopardy if funding isn't restored.

Nelson said he will seek to get money for the program included in other legislation.

But Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., a longtime supporter of the Byrne-JAG program, was pessimistic about the chances of restoring the money. He suggested the fight already has moved on to the next federal budget cycle.

"I think this was our last shot to make up for what was cut out," Terry said of the House vote Thursday.

Terry voted in favor of the spending bill. He said he was disappointed to see the grant funding cut, but that the good aspects of the bill outweigh the bad. The legislation includes a significant expansion of veterans educational benefits that he supports, for example.

Omaha police have used grant money to train crime lab personnel and to support the Metro Drug Task Force.

The grants also are used to pay police overtime for certain special operations. For example, when there is an outbreak of violence or a rash of burglaries, the department uses the funds to pay overtime for officers to respond to the situation, Interim Omaha Police Chief Eric Buske said.

The task force will go on even without the grant funding, Buske said, but the city will have to come up with more of its own money or possibly curtail some activities.

"It's not necessarily going to eliminate any program, but we'll have to prioritize how we do these things," Buske said.

Lancaster County Attorney Gary Lacey was frustrated enough by the cuts that he decided to pull back one of two prosecutors he had assigned to work with the U.S. Attorney's Office to prosecute cases in federal court.

Lacey said Friday that he couldn't see why he should continue providing that attorney, when the grant programs were being cut. He also cited the elimination of funding for a prosecutor training facility in South Carolina.

"I don't see that the federal government cares one way or another whether we do drug prosecutions anymore," Lacey said.

Sarpy County Attorney Lee Polikov said the grants started as a trial program with the idea that if the operations they funded proved successful, local agencies would take over the costs.

Instead, agencies have grown dependent on that funding, he said, and the cuts will have a big impact on what agencies are doing.

"Maybe we need to be weaned off of it -- that's one thing," Polikov said. "But just to say there's \$600 million yesterday and today there is no more -- it doesn't make any sense."

