



Now You See Him —Now You Don't

The Story of America's Witness Protection Program

The Federal Witness Protection Program helps repentant (or just plain scared) criminals (as well as a few non-criminals) who agree to testify against dangerous underworld leaders go into hiding and begin a new life in a new location, making it impossible for organized crime to discover their true identity. Founded by a Jew, who as a boy was horrified to find out how his father had been intimidated by organized crime, the program was instrumental in breaking the power of the Mafia. Read about the history, principles and astounding activities of this highly successful government program.



Imagine someone offered you a chance to change your identity and start everything fresh again. We're talking about *everything*: new name, new date of birth, new address in a new city, new neighbors and friends, new social security number, even a new appearance! *Everything*.

While the idea may or may not appeal to you, there are all sorts of people out there who would grab the chance. Think of all the wanted criminals, the crooked politicians whose corruption is about to become public, and those totally unsuccessful fellows who would jump at any chance to start again in the hope of better fortune the next time around.

Fantastic as the idea may sound, dozens of Americans do precisely that each year. They simply disappear into thin air... and reappear in a different part of the country with a completely new identity. Not only that, they do so with the full help and support of the federal government!

Meet the Federal Witness Protection Program that is carried out under the auspices of the US Marshals Service, the Justice Department agency that sees to it that federal court rulings are carried out. Each year it helps Americans who agree to testify against dangerous gangsters and underworld leaders. The government helps these witnesses to go into hiding and then begin a new life in a new location, making it impossible for the criminals or their cohorts to discover their true identity.

The program is run by a special unit within the services that takes advantage of highly advanced methods to assist these people 24/7. The marshals keep a close watch on their witnesses, making sure they are following the many orders the agency has given them for their protection and looking out for any slip-ups that could prove fatal.

The existence of the Witness Protection Program is critical for the Justice Department's efforts to fight organized crime. Without it, all the law enforcement efforts in the world would be little deterrent

against the Mafia. Until the program was begun in the late 1960s, a Mafia boss could have an enemy murdered without even concealing his complicity and he had no need to worry. He could not be prosecuted in court because the state would never find a witness willing to risk his life by testifying against such ruthless criminals.

Now, the government can convince at least the more brave and determined witnesses to provide crucial testimony in court, leading to the incarceration of numerous powerful crime-family leaders and restoring law and order where it has been most sorely lacking.

\$50 Million a Year

Philip Tolomeo had been an agent for the Calabrese crime family in Chicago for many years. From 1978 to 1988 he made the rounds of the various people on the Mafia's list of debtors, collecting their "dues" and punishing them when they didn't pay. Somehow he fell out of favor with the boss, Frank Calabrese.

Philip knew the ins and outs of the Mafia and realized it was a matter of time—and not much—until he would be liquidated. He fled from Chicago, taking with him a thick and highly incriminating dossier that documented many of the family's illegal activities, as well as a large sum of money which he pocketed before leaving Chicago.

When Tolomeo appeared at an FBI office with the papers one week later and stated his willingness to testify in court against his former colleagues, the agents were beside themselves with joy. They had been working meticulously for years to develop a case that would bring the family down, and here it had just appeared at their doorstep!

Of course, Tolomeo's life wasn't worth a nickel if he reappeared on the streets. He was inducted into the Witness Protection Program and disappeared completely from view, with the notable exception of a number of occasions over the next few years when he took the witness stand in court and helped

place a large number of leading Mafiosi behind bars.

Today, Philip is living a comfortable life somewhere in America. He has little fear that the men who have sworn revenge will ever get near him. Philip is just one of thousands of Americans who were accepted into the program after proving that they had valuable information to help the government prosecute important criminal figures.

The Justice Department decides whom to accept into the program, with the final word on the subject in the hands of the Attorney General himself. Once Justice has decided to accept an individual, he is handed over to the jurisdiction of the Marshals Service. They provide protection, medical coverage and other day-to-day needs while they help him build a brand new identity.

Every American taxpayer has a hand in this program, since it costs the federal government \$50 million a year to support the 18,000 individuals covered by it. Of course, when considering the benefits of the program and the fact that it helps the government maintain the upper hand in the war against organized crime, the hefty price tag is well worth it.

That's right—the man standing in line behind you at the checkout counter in Wal-Mart might be a former Mafia gangster, drug dealer or terrorist. And it's none of your business. He is living under a new identity now, and his past behavior and dealings should not concern you.

Testify Against the Mafia?!

Gerald Shur could not take his eyes off the black-and-white image sitting in front of him on his desk. He stared at the picture again and again, imagining what this man's last moments were like. The Mafia agent that had finished him off hadn't been satisfied with seeing the man die. He had made sure that the man's last moments on earth would be so shocking that it would not be quickly forgotten.



The US Marshals Service is an agency of the federal government that ensures decisions of the federal courts are carried out.



Federal marshals surround a witness, his face covered to conceal his identity, on his way to a courthouse to testify against an important Mafia figure.

The man in the picture—or what was left of him by the time the photo was taken—had been an informer who had helped federal prosecutors assemble a case against Mafia leaders. His bloody assassination was clearly intended as a warning to others who may have contemplated breaking the time-honored code of *omerta* (Sicilian reference to the Mafia code of silence).

It was October 1961, and the green Shur, a young prosecutor in a special unit of the Justice Department that was occupied with fighting the Mafia, was still not used to the cruelty he would meet in his fight against the brotherhood. Eventually, he slipped the picture back into an envelope and hid it carefully in his drawer. He didn't want his secretary to discover the grisly image by mistake. That man was the twenty-fifth informer to be murdered in the last five years.

