

F.B.I. Faces New Setback in Computer Overhaul

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WASHINGTON — The [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) has suspended work on parts of its huge computer overhaul, dealing the agency the latest costly setback in a decade-long effort to develop a modernized information system to combat crime and terrorism.

The overhaul was supposed to be completed this fall, but now will not be done until next year at the earliest. The delay could mean at least \$30 million in cost overruns on a project considered vital to national security, Congressional officials said.

F.B.I. officials said that design changes and “minor” technical problems prompted the suspension of parts of the third and fourth phases of the work, which is intended to allow agents to better navigate investigative files, search databases and communicate with one another.

The decision to suspend work on the \$305 million program is particularly striking because the current contractor, [Lockheed Martin](#), was announced to great fanfare in 2006 after the collapse of an earlier incarnation of the project with the [Science Applications International Corporation](#).

“This is terribly frustrating,” Senator [Charles E. Grassley](#), the Iowa Republican who has been a frequent critic of the F.B.I.’s computer systems, said in an interview Thursday. “We’ve been through this song and dance before. Wouldn’t you think after hundreds of millions of dollars being wasted that they’d finally get it right?”

Beyond the financial costs are concerns about the F.B.I.’s ability to handle its law enforcement and national security responsibilities with an information system still regarded as sub-par in some crucial areas.

In a paper-driven culture, the agency’s computers were so inadequate that many agents until several years ago could not send or receive e-mail messages, and had difficulty getting case histories and linking to other databases. In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, agents in Florida had to send photographs of the hijackers by overnight mail to Washington because they could not send e-mail attachments.

The current project, known as Sentinel, has fixed some longstanding problems, including difficulties with e-mail and database searching, auditors have found.

But in examining recent work, officials realized that mundane problems — like slow response times, awkward display pages and screen print that was too small — were cropping up.

Posing added complications were guidelines on F.B.I. operations put in place in 2008 that gave agents more latitude to look at factors like ethnicity and religion in terrorism investigations. That type of data was not typically used by the F.B.I. when the project began, and officials said they were trying to find ways to incorporate the expanded criteria into their investigative files and computer reports.

F.B.I. officials said they viewed the issues more as minor kinks than serious problems. They said the problems had not compromised agents' ability to respond to threats.

The officials said the decision to suspend work on other parts of the program reflected the lessons learned from previous setbacks. When Lockheed Martin won the contract, the F.B.I. ended the previous computer overhaul and started over because the problems had grown too big to fix.

[Robert S. Mueller III](#), director of the F.B.I., acknowledged problems in the project when he was asked about it at a House appropriations hearing on Wednesday.

Mr. Mueller said the F.B.I. wanted to make the needed adjustment in the system now “so that when we roll it out, it would be successful.”

He added: “I’m the one who made the decision to delay until we got these issues addressed, and I am comfortable and confident that the system is working. It is a good system and will be beneficial when we are through.”

Kimberly Jaindl, a spokeswoman for Lockheed Martin, said that the company was “committed to our customer’s mission of delivering a flexible and affordable information management system,” adding, “We will continue working diligently toward that goal.”

While the F.B.I. described the problems as a minor setback, Congressional officials said they were alarmed.

Mr. Grassley and Senator [Richard C. Shelby](#), Republican of Alabama, told Mr. Mueller in a letter this week that they viewed the problems as a “serious development” that threatened the entire project. They sought answers about the source of the problems and Lockheed Martin’s work.

“This is a red flag,” said a Congressional official briefed by the F.B.I. on the problems this month, “because they’ve failed so many times before.”

The work suspension comes at an awkward time, as Congressional committees begin reviewing F.B.I. requests for about a 4 percent budget increase, or an additional \$317 million.

Mr. Grassley said he wanted a better understanding of what was causing the computer problems before agreeing to budget increases. “It’s just a simple waste of taxpayer money,” he said.

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