

FBI Urged to Protect Whistleblowers

Mon Nov 11, 6:02 PM ET

By CURT ANDERSON, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - An FBI manager suffered humiliating retaliation from his superiors after publicly airing allegations about uneven discipline at the agency, according to two senators who are urging greater FBI protection for whistle-blowers.

Sens. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, and Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said in a letter to FBI Director Robert Mueller that the case appears to demonstrate that efforts to change the insular FBI culture are far from complete.

"Any FBI agent ought to be able to speak publicly about any issues that don't compromise investigations or national security," Grassley said Monday. "These allegations are serious. They demand full attention from the top."

The senators described several allegations of retaliation against John Roberts, unit chief of the FBI's Office of Professional Responsibility, after Roberts appeared Oct. 27 on the CBS show "60 Minutes." Roberts had obtained FBI approval to appear on the program, during which he essentially repeated previous public testimony to Congress regarding unfair discipline for agency rank-and-file workers compared with senior managers.

After the show aired, Grassley and Leahy say two top FBI managers - Office of Professional Responsibility assistant director Robert Jordan and W. Wilson Lowery Jr., the office's executive assistant director - "engaged in a course of retaliatory action" against Roberts.

An FBI spokeswoman said Monday the agency would have no comment on the allegations in the letter, which was sent to Mueller on Friday.

Later Monday, attorneys for Roberts asked Attorney General John Ashcroft in a letter to undertake a formal investigation of the Roberts case and to stop FBI officials from acting further against Roberts or his wife, also an FBI employee.

"This level of retaliation is simply intolerable," said the letter, signed by attorney Stephen Kohn and others representing the couple.

Mueller has dealt with several high-profile whistle-blower cases in recent months. Among them, Coleen Rowley, the FBI legal counsel in Minneapolis who complained that top agency officials blocked efforts to investigate terror suspect Zacarias Moussaoui before Sept. 11, 2001.

A former FBI linguist, Sibel Edmonds, claims her dismissal last spring was retaliation stemming from her claims about serious lapses in the agency's ability to translate foreign languages. The Justice Department's inspector general is investigating that case.

In the Roberts case, the senators say he was "angrily confronted" by Jordan after the show aired. Later, the senators say Jordan held a staff meeting when Roberts was out sick in which he read a transcript of the "60 Minutes" appearance, telling the group the FBI was "a family" and implying that problems should be handled in private. Roberts' wife, who also works in the same FBI unit, was at the meeting and was extremely upset by it, the letter said.

After challenging Roberts in "an aggressive and hostile" encounter to back up his claims, Jordan and Lowery also told Roberts they were referring the matter to the Justice Department's inspector general, the letter said. That referral, they said, "appears to be an effort to sidestep responsibility for FBI missteps and send a discouraging message" to other employees.

Roberts, whose office handles FBI employee misconduct investigations, made previous claims that a disparity exists between the way senior officials and lower-level employees are disciplined. Those claims are the basis of an unreleased inspector general's report that Grassley and Leahy say criticizes the FBI for

a double standard in employee discipline.

"For the same offense, they hammer the rank and file but let the senior managers off," said Kris Kolesnik, executive director of the National Whistleblower Center and an investigator in the Roberts case.

Grassley and Leahy, who are sponsoring legislation to strengthen protections for FBI whistle-blowers, asked Mueller to investigate the allegations in the Roberts case and report his findings.

"You have repeatedly pledged, both in public and personally to us in private, that you will not tolerate retaliation against FBI whistle-blowers," the senators wrote. "We urge you to follow through on these words with actions and take appropriate corrective act."

On the Net: National Whistleblowers Center: <http://www.whistleblowers.org>

Copyright © 2002 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in the AP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Associated Press.