



## Senator pushes for action on police 'militarization'

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As lawmakers return to Washington on Monday, Sen. Claire McCaskill wants to put the fallout from the police shooting in Ferguson at the top of the congressional agenda.

The Missouri Democrat is set to hold a hearing Tuesday examining "police militarization," with a focus on three federal programs that supply local police departments with military equipment and counterterrorism tools, among other assistance.

The programs have come under scrutiny after police in Ferguson responded to the civil unrest there clad in body armor and camouflage, driving armored vehicles and carrying assault rifles. The military-style response further inflamed tensions in that St. Louis suburb, already reeling after an officer shot and killed an unarmed 18-year-old African-American, Michael Brown.

McCaskill said there has not been enough congressional oversight of Washington's efforts to equip local law enforcement agencies. She plans to examine a broad set of questions — from how the equipment is being used, whether it's really needed, and whether officers have proper training for the weapons and other items they receive.

"It's important that we get a handle on all these programs, and how they are working with or against each other," said McCaskill, who chairs a Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs subcommittee.

Right now, three federal agencies send money and equipment to local police: the Pentagon, the Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security. Top officials from each of those agencies will testify Tuesday, along with law enforcement representatives and a photographer for *The St. Louis American* who witnessed the protests and the police response.

In the wake of Ferguson, the Pentagon program has attracted the most attention, because it has supplied local police departments with everything from grenade launchers to armored vehicles. Congress first created the program in 1990, authorizing the Department of Defense to send "excess" equipment to state and local law enforcement agencies to combat narcotics. Lawmakers expanded the program in 1997, allowing the equipment to be sent to law enforcement agencies for other purposes.

Since 1997, the program has provided \$5.1 billion of equipment to local law enforcement agencies around the country, usually at little or no cost.

Supporters say the equipment is vital for strapped local agencies that need to be prepared for dicey situations — including possible terrorist attacks. On its website, the Defense Logistics Agency, the Pentagon branch that oversees the program, says local police use the equipment for everything from drug interdiction to patrolling the streets. It also fills more mundane needs, "such as file cabinets, copiers and fax machines" that local sheriffs might not otherwise be able to afford, the DLA website says.

But critics argue that local law enforcement officials now look more like they're prepared for combat in Iraq than for patrolling local communities.

Tim Lynch, director of a criminal justice project at the libertarian Cato Institute, said paramilitary units — like SWAT teams — were initially only in big cities, but now they're in small towns across America.

"And they are not just being used for extraordinary situations, as they were in the beginning," Lynch said, citing, for example, a hostage standoff. "Nowadays, they are called out for routine policing."

McCaskill said she saw clear examples of both sides of the argument on the ground in Ferguson.

"I saw where there was a military presence (by Ferguson police) that was counterproductive," she said. "And I saw" an armored vehicle "used to extricate some law enforcement officers who were in a very dangerous situation with the crowds" attacking police.

"I don't come into this assuming that all of us this is bad," McCaskill added.

While lawmakers are increasingly questioning the Pentagon program, it's far from clear whether there will be enough support to curb the program.

In June, the House overwhelmingly defeated an amendment that would have blocked the transfer of some equipment, such as aircraft, armored vehicles and grenade launchers, from the Pentagon to local police and sheriffs.

Rep. Billy Long, R-Mo., said ending the program "would accomplish little beyond raising costs" for local police departments. Still, he said it's important to make sure local police are properly trained to use any military equipment they receive.

"The conversation should be about police training and culture," he said.

Jim Bueermann, president of the Police Foundation and a scheduled witness at Tuesday's hearing, said images of heavily armed police in Ferguson were "very disturbing to many people." But he said the weapons have helped police respond to extremely dangerous situations.

Whether "the use of SWAT teams or military-like equipment is appropriate or not" depends entirely on the context, he said. The best way to address questions about the programs, Bueermann said, is to require greater transparency and accountability from police departments in how they use such tools.

McCaskill said she would consider her legislative options after Tuesday's hearing, saying it's vital to keep these issues in the spotlight even as lawmakers grapple with a bevy of other legislative priorities.

"It would be very foolish for us to put (Ferguson) back on the shelf and pretend like it didn't happen," McCaskill said.