

The Forgotten 30,000: Why Congress Must Include State Judges in the Protect Our Prosecutors and Judges Act

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Introduction

On January 18, 2026, Tippecanoe County Superior Court Judge Steven Meyer and his wife answered a knock at their front door in Lafayette, Indiana. A man claiming to be looking for his dog stood outside. When Judge Meyer responded through the closed door, the man fired multiple shotgun blasts through it, striking both the judge and his wife. Both survived, but only barely.¹

Five individuals have been arrested. The alleged mastermind, Thomas Moss, is a high-ranking member of the Phantom Motorcycle Club with ties to the Vice Lords street gang. He was scheduled to appear before Judge Meyer for trial just two days after the shooting. Prosecutors allege this was a coordinated gang conspiracy to assassinate the sitting judge.²

The Meyer shooting was not an isolated incident. In 2017, our colleague Judge Joseph Bruzzese of the Jefferson County Common Pleas Court was ambushed outside the courthouse in Steubenville by a litigant who had waited in his car for nearly an hour. The attacker shot Judge Bruzzese multiple times at point-blank range. But Judge Bruzzese was armed—he drew his weapon and returned fire, as did a probation officer nearby. The attacker was killed; Judge Bruzzese survived and returned to the bench weeks later.³ As Jefferson County Sheriff Fred Abdalla said afterward: “If there wasn’t a probation officer, this gentleman would have kept shooting until he killed the judge.”⁴

In 2023, Maryland Circuit Court Judge Andrew Wilkinson was murdered outside his home by a defendant in a custody case—hours after the judge had ruled against him. In 2022, retired Wisconsin Circuit Court Judge John Roemer was murdered in his home by a man he had sentenced years earlier. The killer zip-tied him to a chair before executing him.⁵

Against this backdrop, Congress is considering legislation that would extend self-defense protections to prosecutors and judges—but inexplicably excludes the more than 30,000 state court judges who handle 98% of the nation’s cases. Senate Bill 2993, the Protect Our Prosecutors and Judges Act of 2025, would amend the Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act (LEOSA) to authorize concealed carry for qualified state and federal prosecutors and qualified federal judges.⁶ State judges—including Ohio’s 722 judges—are deliberately left out.

The Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act

LEOSA, codified at 18 U.S.C. §§ 926B and 926C, was enacted in 2004 to address a practical problem: law enforcement officers who traveled across state lines faced inconsistent firearms laws that could render them unable to carry concealed weapons for self-defense outside their home jurisdictions.⁷

Congress recognized that law enforcement officers face ongoing personal risk due to their professional duties—risk that does not stop at jurisdictional boundaries or the cessation of the officer’s active-duty status. An officer who arrested a dangerous criminal in Ohio might encounter that criminal’s associates while vacationing in Florida. The officer’s need for self-defense did not disappear simply because they crossed a state line, but their legal authority to carry a concealed weapon might.

LEOSA solved this problem by creating a federal floor: qualified law enforcement officers and qualified retired law enforcement officers who meet specified criteria may carry concealed firearms in any state, notwithstanding state or local laws that would otherwise prohibit such carry. The statute does not require states to issue permits or licenses; it operates as a direct federal authorization.

The logic is straightforward: certain individuals face heightened personal risk as a direct consequence of their professional roles. That risk follows them wherever they go, and even after retirement. They should have the legal authority to defend themselves regardless of where they happen to be.

The Gap in S. 2993

S. 2993 would extend LEOSA’s protections to prosecutors and federal judges. The bill defines “qualified prosecutor” as an employee of “the Federal Government or a State or unit of local government” who prosecutes criminal offenses.⁸ This is deliberately expansive: it covers federal, state, and local prosecutors—including part-time assistant prosecutors.

But the bill defines “qualified Federal judge” as an individual “serving in a position as a judge that is established under article I, III, or IV of the Constitution of the United States.”⁹ By its express terms, this excludes every state court judge.

The internal logic is incoherent. If prosecution creates risk regardless of jurisdictional level—and the bill assumes it does by covering all prosecutors—then adjudication does too. A state trial judge sentencing a violent offender faces the same risk as a federal district judge doing the same. The threat follows the function, not the jurisdictional level.

The absurdity is stark: a part-time county assistant prosecutor handling traffic cases would receive LEOSA protection; the state trial judge presiding over capital murder cases would not. In the Meyer case itself, the local prosecutors pursuing charges against the gang members would be protected; Judge Meyer, the intended victim, would not.

The Numbers

The federal judiciary comprises approximately 1,800 judicial officers. There are more than 30,000 state court judges presiding over 98% of all cases—some 70 million filings annually, compared to fewer than one million in federal courts.¹⁰ State judges outnumber federal judges 17 to one; state filings exceed federal filings 77 to one. Each state judge handles, on average, four to five times as many cases as each federal judge.

S. 2993 would protect the 1,800 while leaving the 30,000 exposed.

Why State Judges Face Greater Risk

State trial courts handle the cases most likely to generate personal vendettas: criminal sentencings, domestic violence protection orders, child custody disputes, terminations of parental rights. These place judges face-to-face with defendants who know exactly who is responsible for their fate.

Federal judges have the United States Marshals Service. Most state judges have no equivalent—court security typically ends at the courthouse door. State judges are on their own during their commutes, at their homes, at the grocery store, at their children's schools, or on a family trip.

State judges—especially in smaller jurisdictions—are known community members. Their addresses may be easily discoverable through property records, voter registration, or simple local knowledge. Judge Meyer was found at his home in Lafayette, Indiana—population 70,000. Judge Bruzzese was ambushed outside the courthouse in Steubenville. These were not sophisticated intelligence operations; they were simple acts of locating people who live in communities where they are known.

In Ohio and most other states, judges are elected. They must campaign—attending public events, knocking on doors, walking in parades, appearing at candidate forums, shaking hands at county fairs. Federal judges, appointed for life, face no such exposure. The campaign trail increases not only the judge's visibility but also the opportunity for those who harbor grievances to locate and confront them. A judge walking a parade route or greeting voters at a festival is uniquely vulnerable.

The Threat Data

The U.S. Marshals Service reported that threats against federal judges more than doubled in four years, from 224 cases in 2021 to 564 in 2025.¹¹ These numbers are tracked because there is a centralized system for tracking them.

There is no equivalent national system for state judges. Late last year, the Department of Homeland Security issued a nationwide alert warning that harassment of judges has surged and the trend is likely to continue.¹²

A New York Times investigation in April 2026 identified thousands of threats targeting state judges in the past three years, among more than 14,000 broader security incidents involving state courts across the country. An analysis of 15 states revealed threats climbing in all but two.¹³

More than 150 of 214 Indiana judges responding to a 2023 security survey reported receiving threats. According to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, 188 threats were recorded in 2024—114 of which were direct threats of physical harm or death.¹⁴

Perhaps most striking: a 2024 randomized national survey of state judges published in Court Review found that more than half of the 398 respondents reported receiving threats of harm. Nearly a third reported carrying a gun for protection since taking the bench. And half reported receiving less than a day of official security training.¹⁵

Judicial Security and Judicial Independence

The case for including state judges in S. 2993 is not merely about personal safety. It is about judicial independence and the rule of law.

As the National Center for State Courts observed following the Meyer shooting: “The increase in attacks against the judiciary, however, has become an existential threat to the rule of law.”¹⁶

Chief Justice Loretta Rush of the Indiana Supreme Court, who has herself been subjected to threats of vehicle sabotage, bomb scares, and graphic threats to burn her alive, put it plainly: “The idea of shooting a judge because of the role they have fundamentally affects what it means to live in a free society.”¹⁷

Consider a judge presiding over a gang prosecution after the Meyer shooting. The evidence is clear; the law requires a substantial sentence. But the judge knows what happened to Judge Meyer—shot through his front door because he was scheduled to preside over a gang member’s trial. The judge has a family.

The courageous judge sentences according to law. But even the courageous judge may experience that moment of hesitation, that involuntary calculation of personal risk. And the judge who must consciously overcome fear to do their duty is a judge whose independence has already been compromised, even if they ultimately rule correctly.

We should not design a system that requires heroism. We should design a system where ordinary conscientiousness is sufficient.

As Texas State District Judge Julie Kocurek—who survived a 2015 assassination attempt in her driveway by a man with a pending case in her court—has observed: “These threats affect the independence of our judiciary and people’s willingness to serve.”¹⁸

Judge Bruzzese is alive today because he was prepared. When ambushed at point-blank range, he did not wait for help that might have arrived too late; he drew his weapon and fought back.

The Amendment Required

The fix is straightforward. S. 2993 should be amended to add parallel definitions for “qualified State judge” and “qualified retired State judge” that mirror the bill’s provisions for federal judges.

A state judge definition would require that the individual: (1) is serving in a position as a judge of a state constitutional court or court of record; (2) is not the subject of a pending disciplinary proceeding that could result in removal from office; (3) is not under the influence of alcohol or another intoxicating or hallucinatory drug or substance; and (4) is not prohibited by federal law from receiving a firearm.

Additionally, state judges would need to present photographic identification establishing judicial status and a certification that they have met qualifying firearms standards—either those established by the state or, if none exist, standards set by a law enforcement agency within that state.¹⁹

This amendment would not create a new principle; it would apply the bill’s existing principle consistently. If prosecutors at all levels deserve LEOSA protection, and if federal judges deserve LEOSA protection, then state judges—who face comparable or greater threats with fewer institutional resources—deserve it too.

Conclusion

I have spent more than fifty years in the justice system—as a peace officer, as an attorney, and as a judge. I have been the object of countless threats, including at least two that resulted in felony prosecutions and convictions. I have presided over cases involving the intended bombing of a judge and his family and the murder-for-hire of another judge. A judicial colleague of mine was shot multiple times walking from his car to the courthouse; he and another returned fire, killing the assailant. I have received death threats from across the country after controversial decisions—one involving COVID-19 restrictions, another after a viral sentencing video attracted over seven million views.

I know what it means to look out for myself and my family, to take every precaution, because “the police are minutes away when seconds count.” As a retired police officer, I can attest to that.

How much more can our state judiciary take before it affects—or could appear to affect—judicial decisions? Before it discourages qualified individuals from aspiring to the bench?

The exclusion of state judges from S. 2993 is not merely an oversight—it is an injustice. It tells 30,000 state judges that Congress considers their security less worthy of protection than that of their federal counterparts—that state judges’ lives do not matter. It tells the judges who handle the most dangerous cases that they are on their own.

Congress should correct this before it is too late. The next knock on a judge’s door may come from someone who is not looking for a dog.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent the official positions of the Ohio Eleventh District Court of Appeals, the American Judges Association, the Ohio Judicial Conference, or any other organization.

¹ Indiana Judge, Wife Shot Through Front Door; 5 Arrested in Gang Conspiracy, Wash. Post, Jan. 20, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2026/01/20/judge-steve-meyer-indiana/> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

² 5 Charged in Connection with Shooting of Indiana Judge, ABC News, Jan. 24, 2026, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/5-charged-connection-shooting-indiana-judge-including-man/story?id=129497468> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

³ Ohio Judge Shot in Ambush Outside Courthouse, Returns Fire at Attacker, Wash. Post, Aug. 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/08/21/ohio-judge-shot-in-ambush-outside-courthouse-returns-fire-at-attacker/> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Maryland Judge Killed by Suspect in Divorce Case, CBS News, Oct. 20, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/judge-andrew-wilkinson-shot-to-death-driveway-hagerstown-maryland-home/> (last accessed 7/28/2026); Former Wisconsin Judge Killed in Targeted Attack, Wash. Post, June 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/06/04/wisconsin-judge-killed-targeted-roemer-uhde/> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

⁶ Protect Our Prosecutors and Judges Act of 2025, S. 2993, 119th Cong. (2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/2993> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

⁷ Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-277, 118 Stat. 865 (codified at 18 U.S.C. §§ 926B–926C), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/926B> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

⁸ S. 2993 § 2(a)(1).

⁹ S. 2993 § 2(b)(1).

¹⁰ Admin. Off. of the U.S. Courts, Judicial Business 2024, <https://www.uscourts.gov/data-news/reports/statistical-reports/judicial-business-united-states-courts/judicial-business-2024> (last accessed 7/28/2026); Nat'l Ctr. for State Courts, <https://www.ncsc.org/about-us> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

¹¹ Katie J.M. Baker, State Judges Turn to Guns in New Era of Judicial Threats, N.Y. Times, Apr. 10, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/10/us/state-judges-threats.html> (last accessed 7/28/2026) (citing U.S. Marshals Service data showing threats against federal judges more than doubled from 224 cases in 2021 to 564 in 2025).

¹² Baker, *supra* note 11 (citing Department of Homeland Security nationwide alert to law enforcement agencies issued late 2025).

¹³ *Id.* The Times requested data from all 50 states; an analysis of 15 states that provided specific data revealed threats climbing in all but two. In Texas, court-security-related incidents jumped from 447 in 2023 to 2,129 in 2025. In New York, judicial security investigations more than doubled from 204 cases in 2020 to 514 in 2024.

¹⁴ Indiana Office of Judicial Admin., 2023 Judicial Security Survey, <https://www.in.gov/courts/news/2026/0123> (last accessed 7/28/2026); Man Accused of Stalking a Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Gets Probation in a Plea Deal, Associated Press, Jan. 6, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/wisconsin-supreme-court-stalking-probation-karofsky-6bc5e2dc5c0c616f22843eb06ab41481> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

¹⁵ Baker, *supra* note 11 (citing 2024 randomized national survey published in Court Review, the quarterly journal of the American Judges Association).

¹⁶ National Center for State Courts, Latest Attack on State Judge Another Reminder That Congress Should Act, Jan. 28, 2026, <https://www.ncsc.org/news/latest-attack-state-judge-another-reminder-congress-should-act> (last accessed 7/28/2026).

¹⁷ Baker, *supra* note 11 (quoting Chief Justice Loretta Rush of the Indiana Supreme Court).

¹⁸ *Id.* (quoting Texas State District Judge Julie Kocurek, who survived a 2015 assassination attempt in her driveway by a man with a pending case in her court).

¹⁹ Congress's decision to explicitly include prosecutors and judges in S. 2993 does not necessarily mean they are excluded under current law. A case can be made that judges already qualify under LEOSA's existing definitions. See Eugene A. Lucci, Judicial Arrest Authority and LEOSA: A Case for Inclusion of Judges Under Federal Concealed Carry Protections, For the Record (Ohio Jud. Conf.), Second Quarter 2025. Explicit inclusion in S. 2993, however, would remove any doubt and provide the clarity that state judges deserve.