

C. Working with Congress to Strengthen Statutory Authority and Increase Resources

The support of Congress has been essential in responding to these crimes. When the Task Force was **formed**, the Federal government had authority under several statutes to investigate and prosecute suspicious fires at houses of **worship**. They include the Anti-Arson Act of 1982, which makes it a federal crime to use fire to destroy property involved in interstate commerce (18 U.S.C. 844(i)), and **criminal** civil rights statutes that make it a federal crime to desecrate religious property or a house of worship or to conspire to deprive persons of their **civil rights** (18 U.S.C. 241 and 247).

On July 3, 1996, the President signed the Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996, which had been sponsored by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), Senator Lauch Faircloth (R-NC), Congressman Henry J. Hyde (R-IL) and Congressman John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI). This **statute**, passed unanimously by both Houses of Congress, amended 18 U.S.C. 247, to strengthen the criminal law against church burning and **desecration**. The new law removed a cumbersome interstate commerce **requirement**, eliminated a \$10,000 damage **requirement**, and increased the maximum sentence to 20 years imprisonment for **arson**.

The legislation also authorized a HUD loan guarantee program that can be used for church **rebuilding**, and authorized additional personnel at the Treasury Department and the Justice **Department**, including the Community Relations **Service**, to respond to the **fires**. Assistant Attorney General Patrick and Assistant Secretary Johnson, representing the NCATF, testified before House and Senate committees in support of this **legislation**, identifying the need for amending the existing statutory **framework**.

In August 1996, in a supplemental appropriation for fiscal year 1996, Congress provided \$12.011 million dollars to support ATF's role in the Task Force. In September 1996, Congress appropriated an additional \$12.011 million dollars in ATF's fiscal year 1997 direct **funding** to support arson **investigations**, particularly those directed toward religious **institutions**. Additional **funds** for Task Force activities by the Justice Department and the FBI were also appropriated or **reprogrammed**.

III. The Task Force is Producing Results

Scope of the Problem: The NCATF has opened investigations of 328 **arsons**, bombings or attempted bombings that have occurred at houses of **worship** between **January 1, 1995**, and **January 7, 1997**. This number does not include vandalism or other desecration at houses of **worship**, which continue to be investigated and prosecuted by the **FBI** and the Civil Rights **Division**. Nor does it include fires that the investigators have **determined** are **accidental**.

Of these 328 arson **investigations**, at least 138 have been fires at African American **churches**. Three quarters of the fires at **African** American churches have occurred in the southern United **States**. **Arsons** at all houses of worship continue to be reported in significant **numbers**.