

# Oklahoma City Museum Looking For Protected Witness

Kevin Johnson , USA TODAY 6:29 p.m. EDT April 17, 2015

(Photo: Associated Press courtesy of CNN Headline News)

OKLAHOMA CITY — Representatives of the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial and Museum have been privately seeking the cooperation of a convicted associate of Timothy McVeigh, now believed to be hidden in the government's witness protection program.

Museum officials have contacted the U.S. Marshal's Service, which manages the secret program, for assistance in soliciting an oral history from Michael Fortier that would outline his relationship with the bomber and his fateful decision not to alert authorities prior to the attack, said Kerri Watkins, the memorial's executive director.

The bombing remains the deadliest assault carried out by domestic terrorists in the U.S.,



The Arizona man served as a star witness against McVeigh in the bomber's 1997 trial, after striking a deal with federal prosecutors in which he agreed to testify that McVeigh confided his plan to target the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City with the powerful fertilizer bomb that left 168 dead two decades ago.

Officials are marking the 20th anniversary of the attack Sunday in ceremonies at the downtown memorial where empty chairs arrayed on the vast lawn where the building once stood symbolize the lives lost in the assault.

Based in part on Fortier's testimony, McVeigh was convicted in 1997 and executed in 2001. Fortier, who also testified against convicted bombing conspirator Terry Nichols, served more than 10 years of a 12-year sentence for failing to inform authorities about the plot. He was released in 2006 and his whereabouts have remained shrouded in secrecy.

The unusual search for the witness, Watkins said, is part of a broader effort by the museum to debrief major figures related to the incident to provide a fuller account of the attack, which opened the nation's eyes to a simmering threat from within, altered the landscape of victims' rights in the U.S., and began transforming the government's anti-terrorism strategy.

The museum has not formally sought Nichols' cooperation out of concern that it would provide the convicted conspirator an unwelcome "platform," the executive director said. Nichols is serving a life sentence in the federal government's maximum security prison in Florence, Colo., also known as Supermax.

Watkins said Fortier's cooperation could be "incredibly relevant" to the museum's attempt to educate visitors about the tragic risks associated with remaining silent in the face of dangerous risks.

"If he called tomorrow, we'd go get the story," Watkins said.

The Marshal's Service has not confirmed that Fortier is part of the program, which has provided protection for 8,500 government witnesses and 9,900 family members since it began in 1971. And the agency declined to address any contact with museum representatives.

An official with knowledge of the matter but not authorized to speak publicly about it said Fortier has been in the government's protective custody.

Watkins said there have been at least "a couple" of attempts at contacting the witness in the past two years.

An Oklahoma City police car decorated with the words, "We will never forget" and a small American flag sit near the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995. (Photo: Rick Bowmer, AP)

Tulsa attorney Michael McGuire, who represented Fortier during the bombing investigation, declined to elaborate on his client's whereabouts or his association with the government program.

He said his client has no immediate interest in making any public statements about his involvement in the 1995 attack.

"He doesn't want to be interviewed," McGuire said.

In his testimony during McVeigh's 1997 trial, Fortier said his former Army buddy took him to the site of the Oklahoma federal building four months before the attack and identified it as the target of the bomb plot.

"He made the comment that if he (McVeigh) had to, he was going to drive the truck down the stairs and crash it through the front door," Fortier told the jury. The witness also recalled details about the building, including its nine-story facade of black glass.

Fortier testified that during the ride McVeigh asked whether a large truck would fit in the drive-up space at the front of the building, where the 4,800-pound explosive was ultimately detonated.

"I said you could probably fit three trucks there," Fortier testified.

Fortier's wife, Lori, who was granted immunity from prosecution in exchange for her testimony, told the McVeigh jury that on at least three occasions in the year before the attack, McVeigh outlined details of his plan. In one conversation, she testified, McVeigh arranged soup cans on the kitchen floor of the couple's trailer home in Kingman, Ariz., to illustrate the attack.

"I could have stopped it," she testified.