

July 28, 2015

Representative
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Oppose H.R. 766 (Luetkemeyer) which will restrict efforts to protect consumers and banks from fraud, money-laundering and other illegal activities

Dear Representative:

The undersigned civil rights and consumer organizations urge you to oppose H.R. 766, the Financial Institution Customer Protection Act of 2015, introduced by Representative Luetkemeyer, and any other measures to restrict the Department of Justice's Operation Choke Point or bank regulator efforts to prevent money laundering and payment fraud.

We are deeply troubled that the House Committee on Financial Services has scheduled H.R. 766 for mark-up despite the recent results of a Department of Justice Office of Professional Responsibility inquiry that found absolutely no evidence of misconduct or targeting of legal businesses by Operation Choke Point. To the contrary, every case brought by DOJ, through this program, has clearly indicated that the banks and payment processors involved were knowingly engaged in fraudulent activity that resulted in millions of dollars drained from consumers' bank accounts.

H.R. 766, the Financial Institution Customer Protection Act of 2015, would limit DOJ's ability to address fraud

H.R. 766 would eliminate the authority that DOJ used to investigate and bring the cases against CommerceWest Bank, Plaza Bank and Four Oaks Bank & Trust for helping scammers to debit consumers' bank accounts. The bill would amend the Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act (FIRREA) to eliminate penalties for and investigative authority into unlawful conduct "affecting" federally insured financial institutions. Instead, agencies could only penalize or investigate illegal conduct "against" a financial institution or "by" the institution against a third party. In other words, DOJ could not use FIRREA authority to look into signs that a bank is knowingly helping scammers to take money out of the accounts of seniors, because the scammers are not targeting the bank and the bank is not targeting the senior. The bill would frustrate efforts to protect not only the public but also insured financial institutions. The bill shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the risk that payment fraud poses to banks, which by law warrant the legality of payments when the bank serves as an intermediary between payors and payees.¹ The bill also imposes new procedural hurdles to investigations into FIRREA violations of any kind.

H.R. 766 would also make it more difficult and burdensome for a banking agency to discourage a financial institution from maintaining a banking relationship with a customer that shows significant signs of involvement with fraud or illegal activity. The bill would require the agency to justify that it has a "material reason" other than reputational risk for asking or encouraging an institution to terminate an

¹ See Testimony of Adam J. Levitin, Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center, Before the United States House of Representatives, Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Regulatory Reform, Commercial, and Antitrust Law, "Guilty Until Proven Innocent? A Study of the Propriety & Legal Authority for the Justice Department's Operation Choke Point" at 9-10 (July 17, 2014), http://judiciary.house.gov/_cache/files/f6210f6f-68eb-49b6-b617-167eecdfe3b/levitin-testimony.pdf.

account; to provide written justification to the financial institution with legal authority; and to issue annual reports to Congress. But reputational risk also leads to other risks, and it is appropriate for regulatory agencies to warn financial institutions if conduct supporting scammers, drug dealers or other criminals could endanger the institution's reputation and lead to a loss of business. More importantly, even if the agency has concerns beyond reputational risk, the bill would impose new, burdensome requirements before an agency could warn a financial institution about red flags of fraudulent conduct by one of the bank's customers.

How Operation Choke Point has worked to protect consumers

Operation Choke Point is focused only on banks that help scammers and other illegal activity. Separately, bank regulators enforce the Bank Secrecy Act's anti-money laundering rules that apply when customers deposit large amounts of cash or transmit money overseas. Regulators also require financial institutions and payment processors to avoid facilitating illegal or fraudulent conduct by knowingly giving fraudsters access to the payment system. None of these efforts are aimed at curtailing legal businesses, whether the business involves payday lending, pawn brokers, gun sales or any other legal business.

All three Operation Choke Point cases involving financial institutions showed that, without a doubt, the banks knowingly helped to process transactions despite clear evidence of fraud:

- **CommerceWest Bank** ignored explicit notice from other banks about *fraud schemes targeting the elderly*, allowing one of its clients to steal tens of millions of dollars from consumers' bank accounts.
- **Plaza Bank's** chief operating officer, who was secretly the part-owner of a payment processor, brushed aside warnings from the bank's compliance officer and allowed *fraudsters unfettered access to the bank accounts* of tens of thousands of consumers.
- **Four Oaks Bank & Trust** facilitated illegal payments taken out of consumer accounts for a *Ponzi scheme, a scam operation targeted by the FTC, and illegal and fraudulent payday loans*.

DOJ and bank regulators are not pressuring banks to close the accounts of legal businesses

DOJ has brought enforcement actions against banks complicit in payment fraud, and has issued subpoenas to other banks that it has reason to suspect might be involved in similar conduct. But there is no evidence that DOJ has pressured any bank to close the account of a legal operation. Similarly, bank regulators are doing their job by enforcing anti-money laundering laws and requiring financial institutions to be alert to signs that a bank account is being used for illegal activity.

Complaints about banks closing the accounts of check cashers, pawn dealers, money transmitters and others stem from the 2001 Bush Administration USA Patriot Act, not Operation Choke Point, which began in 2013. In 2006, FiSCA, the trade association of neighborhood financial service providers, testified: "For the past six years banks have been abandoning us - first in a trickle, then continuously accelerating so that now few banks are willing to service us"² Also in 2006, the National Pawnbroker Association complained to FinCEN that "Pawn industry members have lost longstanding lines of credit as

² Gerald Goldman, General Counsel of FiSCA, "Summary Of speech before the U.S. House Committee on Financial Services, Subcomm.on Fin'l Inst'ns & Consumer Credit , Regarding Banking Services to MSBs (June 21, 2006), http://www.fisca.org/Content/NavigationMenu/GovernmentAffairs/TestimonySpeeches/FiSCAHearingOralStmntGolman_6_21_06.pdf.

well as demand deposit relationships in most parts of the country since 2004.”³ Unfortunately, controls over cash deposits, international money transmitters and know-your-customer requirements are more important than ever.

A DOJ inquiry conducted at the request of Rep. Luetkemeyer and other members found no evidence of misconduct or targeting of legal businesses

At the request of Rep. Luetkemeyer and other members of the House, the Department of Justice Office of Professional Responsibility conducted a review of the allegations that DOJ staff had wrongly forced banks to terminate their relationships with legal businesses. The findings of that inquiry, released earlier this month, showed conclusively that there was no evidence of misconduct.⁴ The inquiry determined that the cases brought forward by DOJ since Operation Choke Point began were well supported and that the companies and people involved were knowingly involved in mass-market fraud schemes.

The inquiry also determined that the Department of Justice properly used FIRREA to address mass-market fraud and that the FIRREA subpoenas issued as part of Operation Choke Point were not used to compel financial institutions to terminate their relationships with legal business and only a small number of subpoenas involved payday lenders.

Conclusion

With escalating data breaches, terrorism threats and internet fraud, we need to encourage, not discourage, efforts to deprive criminals of access to the banking system. H.R. 766 will only frustrate the efforts of Federal regulators that to date, have successfully halted numerous mass-market fraud schemes, protected countless consumers from the financial hardship that follows fraud and have done so without any evidence of misconduct or targeting of lawful businesses.

We urge you to oppose H.R. 766 other efforts to hinder critical federal agency activities to protect the public.

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Yours very truly,

US PIRG
Reinvestment Partners
Public Citizen
Oregon Consumers League
National People’s Action
National Consumers League
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)
National Association of Consumers Advocates
Massachusetts Consumers Council

³ Letter from Fran Bishop, President, National Pawnbroker Association to Robert W. Werner, Director, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) (May 9, 2006), http://www.fincen.gov/statutes_regs/frn/comment_letters/71fr12308_12310/msb_51_bishop.pdf.

⁴ Weinsheimer, G. Bradley. “Department of Justice OPR Inquiry Regarding Operation Choke Point,” July 9, 2015. <http://huff.to/1GLapKI>.

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Florida Alliance for Consumer Protection
Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety
Consumer Federation of California
Consumer Federation of America
Consumer Action
Center for California Homeowner Association Law
California Reinvestment Coalition
Arkansans Against Abusive Payday Lending
Arizona PIRG
Americans for Financial Reform