



Department of Justice

STATEMENT OF

**TRISTRAM J. COFFIN
UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
DISTRICT OF VERMONT**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
UNITED STATES SENATE**

AT A FIELD HEARING IN RUTLAND, VT

ENTITLED

**“COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS TO BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HEROIN
AND OPIOID ADDICTION”**

PRESENTED MARCH 17, 2014

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Thank you for bringing the Senate Judiciary Committee to Vermont and for inviting me to share with you my views about the need for a broader community reaction to heroin and other opioids trafficking, use and addiction. I, and the Department of Justice, appreciate your leadership on these issues for so many years, and your dedication to improving the lives of Vermonters.

First let me say that Rutland is a terrific small city. It has a strong and proud community and a great tradition. But it is a community, like many others throughout New England and the United States, that is going through a difficult time right now. Many communities are having to face up to the many significant challenges that are presented by opioid trafficking and addiction. Rutland is addressing these problems in a forthright, aggressive and creative fashion. I commend Chief Baker and the rest of the Rutland community for doing that.

The heroin and opioid problem in Vermont is not new. It has been building for some time. Under your leadership, this Judiciary Committee has held three field hearings in Vermont on the issue of drugs including opiates in prior years. As the problem of opioid addiction began to emerge, you invited Attorney General Holder here for the Opiate Prescription Medication and Heroin Summit we held in September 2010. As was stated in that hearing, the problem existing then of rampant addiction to opioid prescription medications would soon lead to rampant heroin trafficking and addiction in Vermont. And indeed that has happened.

On March 10, 2014, Attorney General Holder, in a public video message, called the rise in overdose deaths from heroin and other prescription pain-killers an “urgent public health crisis.” I couldn’t agree more. The numbers and statistics are stark. Between 2006 and 2010, heroin overdose deaths increased nationally by 45 percent. Heroin treatment numbers are up over 250% since 2000 and over 40% in the past year. Our office’s prosecution of heroin traffickers is up, with indictments more than doubling last year and totaling more than four times what they were just a few years ago. To me, one of the starkest statistics is the increase in fatal heroin overdoses here in Vermont. Last year’s total, twenty one, was more than twice as many as the year before, and five times the number of just five years ago. These are extremely concerning numbers. I want to echo the Attorney General and urge first responders to carry the drug known as naloxone. When administered quickly and effectively, naloxone immediately restores breathing to a victim in the throes of a heroin or opioid overdose. I applaud the Vermont State Police and the Vermont Health Department for moving forward on this issue. When you

deal with the families of overdose victims who are left behind, I can tell you that every one of these numbers has a face and a name, and loved ones left behind in pain that does not go away.

The Justice Department, along with our partners in the Vermont State Police and the Rutland Police Department, have been aggressive about prosecuting traffickers who seek to profit out of selling this misery. And we will continue to do so. But what this hearing is about is how important it is for the community to respond as a whole to this problem. We will remain active and vigilant on the law enforcement side, but it is not enough. This problem requires a broad community response, and I am thrilled that under the leadership of Chief Baker and others, Rutland is engaged in making this response. And similar, other broad community responses to this problem are happening throughout other parts of Vermont as well.

Attorney General Holder has been very clear with me and my fellow U.S. Attorneys that we need to be smarter on crime, not just tougher. We are not giving the community what it deserves if we offer up only an expensive solution – unlimited incarceration – that does not address the root causes of the problem. When we look at the problem of heroin and opioid use, law enforcement alone is not sufficient to address the problem. Community responses emphasizing prevention and treatment are essential complements to work in conjunction with law enforcement to make the community safer and more drug free.

Over the last three years, I have been fortunate to be involved in one such prevention program. On March 23, 2009, Skip Gates lost his treasured son Will to a heroin overdose. Will was an outstanding young man. He was in his third year at the University of Vermont, studying molecular genetics, a standout alpine ski racer, an incredible young man. We met Skip through the investigation of the heroin trafficker who sold Will the heroin that led to his death. Skip was searching for some way to turn this tragedy into something positive. Working with our office's outstanding crime victim advocate and a great young filmmaker named Derek Halquist, Skip had the courage to share his personal experience of this tragedy in a short film, the Opiate Effect.

We sent the film to all the high schools in Vermont, for free, two years running. For the last three years, Skip and I have traveled throughout Vermont, playing the movie and speaking to young people and parents about the dangers of opioid use. Skip is an eloquent speaker, and the film is powerful. I think a lot of the power of the movie comes from its informational approach. Young people see firsthand the impact heroin has had on Skip, and on his family. They hear from recovering addicts straight talk about what life as a heroin addict is like. The film doesn't moralize. Rather, it lays out the real facts on what life as an opioid addict is all about so young people can make clear choices. In this way the film moves the conversation beyond "just say no."

The film has been well-received throughout Vermont and has won several awards. We've also set Skip up with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Maine where he has done similar work in his home state. We've tried to push the film out nationally and it is available for a free download.

The importance of this, of course, is to try to stop people from entering the opioid addiction and criminal justice pipeline. Because once that happens, there are no good outcomes. Only varying degrees of bad ones.

That is why the prospect of effective drug prevention is so important. We do a lot of work to reduce the supply of drugs coming into this State. But if we are not equally as aggressive on reducing the demand side, our efforts will be of little avail. We need better and more drug treatment to get people who are addicted to these substances off of them. And we need better and more comprehensive prevention approaches to reduce the number of people who fall into this trap. Law enforcement is not the only answer. We need these other efforts as well.

To be successful, these prevention and treatment efforts must come from broad segments of the community. Like those occurring in Rutland and Burlington and many other communities in Vermont, we need to have realistic discussions of the issues communities face from opiate and other substance abuse, and look to the ingenuity and creativity in these communities for newer, broader solutions. We need to ask ourselves what we can do to better educate kids and parents so we reduce drug use at an early age. What can we do to give kids better things to do than to be exposed to drugs? What can we do to divert people from entering the criminal justice system? What can we do better to treat those addicted and get them on the right road? What can we do to help neighborhoods not be comfortable places for drug traffickers?

And when we have these discussions, we need to understand that comprehensive approaches, rather than piecemeal or solely law-enforcement oriented measures, are necessary to solve the problem. Comprehensive solutions rooted in the community, and tailored to each community's unique situation and characteristics, solutions that draw upon the perspectives, skills and insights of a variety of stakeholders – not just the police.

The other witnesses today I know have much to add on this score, so I will close my remarks. But let me do so by thanking the Chairman for permitting me to speak today on behalf of the Department of Justice, and for his substantial, dedicated and caring leadership on this issue over many years.