

U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee Field Hearing
Chairman, Senator Patrick Leahy
Vermont's Battle Against Heroin And Opioid Addiction
Monday, March 17, 2014
Rutland City, Vermont

Prepared Testimony – Colonel Thomas L'Esperance

I would like to start by thanking Senator Leahy for the opportunity to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee to address the many challenges we are currently facing in Vermont related to heroin and opiate addiction. From a law enforcement perspective the numbers are staggering. According to data provided by the Vermont Drug Task Force, in just the past two years alone we have seen a 482% increase in the number of heroin investigations initiated by drug investigators and a 247% increase in the amount heroin seized as a direct result of those investigations.

Instead of focusing on the numbers however, I would like to use my time here to focus on the solutions. Heroin and opiate addiction is a very real and complex issue that requires a dynamic response from all the stakeholders involved. For every statistic cited about heroin there is someone behind it who struggles every day to either stay clean or seek out their next fix. There are no easy answers but we can, and we will make progress as long as we are united and determined. From a statewide perspective we must combine all our efforts and resources to reduce those abusing opiates through treatment; stop the flow of heroin into the state with strong enforcement; and prevent another Vermonter from heading down the road of addiction through education.

I applaud Governor Shumlin for bringing this issue to the forefront in his recent State of the State address. As the director of the Vermont State Police I will continue to strengthen our statewide enforcement efforts while building coalitions with our partners in treatment and prevention. Law enforcement must continue to disrupt supply lines that are responsible for bringing large quantities of heroin into Vermont and further work to prevent drug traffickers from getting a foot hold in the state. I am pleased to say that I can report on a number of achievements we have made.

This past year the Vermont Drug Task Force conducted multiple high level arrest sweeps across the state in Bennington, Springfield and St. Albans. The primary goal of these operations was to dismantle multiple heroin distribution rings operating within our communities and subsequently damaging our quality of life. I can say without hesitation that these operations were a success not only because we slowed the supply of heroin by arresting those responsible for distributing it, but because we were able to impact so many other lives in positive ways.

One such story came to me through an e-mail from a mother whose adult daughter had been struggling with addiction. Her daughter was eventually arrested in the drug sweep in Springfield. It was clear from her e-mail that she felt she had lost her daughter to heroin until the day she was arrested. She said unequivocally that her daughter's arrest ultimately saved her life. After the sweep, her daughter was able to break free from a bad relationship, get the necessary treatment she needed and eventually reunite with her own young children. She expressed appreciation in her e-mail to law enforcement for intervening at a time in her daughter's life when nothing else seemed to be working. There are many similar untold stories

resulting from the work being done by the Drug Task Force. Each story has a positive message of appreciation, resolve and a commitment to taking the community back from drug dealers. The Drug Task Force truly provides a specialized and valuable resource to state and local law enforcement agencies in our statewide efforts to reduce drug supply. Time and time again the task force model proves to be one of the most successful management tools used by law enforcement today in Vermont and across the nation.

In addition to the achievements of the Drug Task Force, I have been working with my command staff to implement a plan to issue Naloxone to every trooper in the state. Having this drug in the hands of first responders will ensure that it is available, if necessary, to reverse the effect of a drug overdose that could potentially mean the difference between life and death. This is an important step to further our public safety mission and one that I am proud to support.

As a rural state, we face unique challenges in our efforts to curb drug abuse and the effects it has on our citizens. We do not have the luxury of the vast resources that exist in urban cities or suburban regions, so to be effective we must pool our resources and collaborate together in order solve these problems. Although it can be more difficult to find solutions in a rural state such as Vermont, the fundamentals of illegal drug markets are the same everywhere. Where there is a demand, there will always be a supply. We cannot ignore this fact and we must work to both disrupt drug trade and reduce demand.

This past January I invited Dr. William Roberts of the Northwestern Medical Center to speak to the entire command staff of the Vermont State Police about addiction. Dr. Roberts is a specialist in pain management and a leader in Vermont on addiction issues. I believe that

forging these types of partnerships between law enforcement and the medical community is essential to breaking down barriers between the two groups and generating an intelligent and comprehensive approach to resolving this problem.

It is often said that law enforcement cannot solve this problem alone, but the truth is that no one can solve it alone. We must continue to build strong relationships like the one the Vermont State Police now has with Dr. Roberts in our effort to drive down demand and ultimately reduce the influx of heroin into the state.

As we move forward I will continue to rely on the tremendous support we have received, and continue to receive from both the state and federal government. Without the funding secured by Senator Leahy over the years our ability to operate the Drug Task Force at the level of success it enjoys today would not be possible. Subsequently, our ability to positively impact local communities and rural sections of the state would be severely diminished.

With your help, we will continue to focus on our mission of preventing further abuse through education and outreach as well as reducing both the supply and demand of heroin through strong enforcement and an equally strong treatment response.

I would again like to thank Senator Leahy and the entire committee for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.