

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy,
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing On "Helping State and Local Law Enforcement in an Economic Downturn"
January 8, 2009**

Later this morning, President-elect Obama will be speaking about the economic crisis and the need for an immediate stimulus package. And so it is fitting that in the Judiciary Committee's first hearing of this new Congress, we consider the urgent need for more Federal assistance to state and local law enforcement, especially during this economic crisis.

Families across America find their economic security increasingly at risk, and the possibility of increased crime during this recession means they may also find their day-to-day safety and security at risk. With unemployment on the rise, cities and towns are cutting budgets, including critical funding for police. We must act quickly and decisively to shore up state and local law enforcement, or face a reversal of the great strides we made to reduce crime in the 1990s.

This new Congress is appropriately focused on how best to turn our economy around and help those most in need. An effective way to protect our citizens, create jobs, and begin rebuilding our economy and our communities with confidence would be to restore Federal support for state and local law enforcement, which was so severely cut over the past eight years.

Congress and the Clinton administration supported American's law enforcement officers like never before, helping to put more than 100,000 new officers on the street. This support for law enforcement contributed to an historic decline in crime rates. But that progress stalled when the Bush administration gutted Federal funding for state and local law enforcement, cutting it by billions. The Bush administration diverted more and more money into Iraq, spending billions to fund training and equipment for police in Iraq instead of here at home.

The time to act is now. The last eight years have been difficult for state and local law enforcement. During the Bush years, there has been nearly a 50 percent reduction in overall funding for state and local law enforcement. If Congress had not stepped in to protect some sources of funding for state and local law enforcement, the cuts would have been far greater. This administration has also gutted assistance to state and local crime prevention programs, despite evidence that has shown time and again that prevention and treatment, along with vigorous law enforcement, are essential to keeping crime rates low.

Law enforcement depends on local tax revenues, which have started to fall with the economic downturn. Police forces will need to cut their already depleted ranks even further without help. So as crime escalates there will be fewer officers and resources to protect our families and communities. Unless we act now.

Allowing state and local police forces to fill vacancies and hire new officers and staff will also contribute to helping jump start our economy. These are good, middle class jobs for middle class people, and they can be filled immediately. These are often jobs for people who live in the hardest hit communities and will spend their money close to home. And what better way to serve our poorest communities than to hire more police officers to help keep them safe.

Supporting state and local law enforcement helps economic development in another important way too. As many of our neighborhoods became safer, property values rose, businesses opened and thrived, and local economies prospered. If crime returns to these newly prosperous neighborhoods, businesses, homeowners, and communities will suffer.

It is essential that we restore the COPS program and the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program to the levels that worked so effectively in the 1990s. I also would like to see us reinvigorate our rural crime focus.

Crime is not just a big city issue. As this Committee heard at hearings in St. Albans and Rutland, Vermont, the drugs and violence so long seen largely in urban areas now plague even our most rural and remote communities. Rural communities also face the added burden of fighting these crime problems without the sophisticated task forces and specialized squads so common in big cities and metropolitan areas. In this environment, we must do more to provide assistance to those rural communities most at risk and hardest hit by the economic crisis. On the first day of this Congress, I introduced the Rural Law Enforcement Assistance Act to ensure that rural communities hit hard by crime and by the recession and without the resources available to larger communities, can get the help they need.

I would like to see us make sure crime victims aren't doubly penalized, first by the crime and then by being denied assistance and compensation. We can prevent that by doing something that does not cost one dime in Federal taxes and that is to raise the cap on the Crime Victims Fund so that we can send more money to the states for crime victims.

Our witnesses this morning bring important perspectives and experience to this vital issue. I have known Chief Schirling of Burlington, Vermont, for many years. I commend his philosophy of seeking innovative ways to meet the new challenges faced by law enforcement today. He has been a leader in the fight against crimes against children and leads the largest police force in our state. I also want to welcome Commissioner Ramsey of Philadelphia, former Associate Attorney General Schmidt, Ms. Leary, from the National Center for Crime Victims and Mr. Mulhausen from the Heritage Foundation.

#####