

**STATEMENT OF SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY (D-Vt.),
CHAIRMAN, SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
HEARING ON
“COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS TO BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HEROIN AND OPIOID ADDICTION”
RUTLAND, VERMONT
MARCH 17, 2014**

This hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee will come to order. Today, we will examine the issue of heroin and opioid addiction, and how communities such as Rutland can successfully come together to solve this complex problem. This is a knotted complex of challenges that reaches into neighborhoods and communities of all kinds and sizes, in urban and rural areas alike.

Vermont has not been spared. Between 2000 and 2012, treatment for opioid addiction in Vermont rose by more than 770 percent. This is consistent with findings that the supply of opioids, including heroin, is expanding across the country. We have all heard the awful stories of young lives cut short by heroin overdoses. Vermont is ahead of most of the country in many ways: Our state has openly identified the problem, and we are all constructively seeking ways to not just help addicts get clean, but to stop this scourge in its tracks. We have heard it many times, but it bears repeating: We cannot arrest our way out of this problem. Prevention, education, and treatment must go hand-in-hand with the important efforts of law enforcement.

Many eyes are now on Vermont. Governor Shumlin has spoken forcefully about the heroin crisis. Its impact is so significant that he dedicated his State of the State message to the problem this year. The Chief Justice of Vermont, Paul Reiber [RYE-ber], has added his voice in the search for solutions, noting in a recent speech: “This challenge is complex and cannot only be met with the blunt tool of criminalization.” Opioid addiction is an issue of great importance to me, not just as a Vermonter, but as someone who cares deeply about making sure we are developing real, lasting solutions. We need to get ahead of addiction and the corrosion that it brings into individual lives, families, and our communities.

As Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I work to solve problems in our criminal justice system at the federal level. What I have seen is that when we look for creative solutions, when we want to find ways to save money and make smart changes, we often look to the states for fresh ideas.

States are often the incubators of innovation. When we in Washington see what’s working in the states, we can adopt that approach for the federal system. Vermonters do not shy away from a challenge. True to form, we have developed some innovative programs in our state by pooling community resources to most effectively help our citizens. Here in Rutland, Chief Baker is working collaboratively with Mayor Louras, residents, community developers, housing advocates and prevention specialists, and is making real progress in identifying ways to break the cycle. This community response, known as Project VISION, serves as a model for how neighbors can marshal forces to confront the drug and related crime problems that plague their neighborhoods. Project VISION’s director, Joe Kraus, summed it up this way: “We have two choices here. We can curse the darkness, or we can light a candle, to quote an old saying.”

We know Rutland is just one example of how communities around Vermont are working together to confront this crisis. And we know that this challenge is not unique to Vermont's largest communities. Lamoille County Sheriff Roger Marcoux, in his written testimony for today's hearing, noted that roughly half of Vermont's opioid-related overdoses since 2011 have occurred in rural settings. So let us focus our efforts on all Vermont communities, big and small.

This is the fourth time in the past six years that I have brought the Senate Judiciary Committee to Vermont to explore issues related to drug abuse and its impact on communities. And although there continue to be challenges, I am hopeful as I sit here today. We often talk about a three-tiered approach to addiction: prevention, treatment, and enforcement. This combination forms the foundation for sound solutions. But Vermont has shown that even more success is possible when these traditional roles are shared – when prevention, treatment, and law enforcement are not separate efforts at all.

I learned from my years as State's Attorney in Chittenden County how important these collaborative efforts are. And today I see a law enforcement community that, more than ever, is fully committed to prevention and treatment efforts. Law enforcement would rather not arrest and prosecute the same offenders over and over when the underlying issue is a treatable addiction. Treating the addiction can be the better and less costly approach. It has the added benefit of fewer cases landing on detectives' and prosecutors' desks.

One of the programs I am working on in Washington is the Second Chance Act, which I have introduced for reauthorization and hope to bring before the Senate Judiciary Committee soon. This program supports initiatives like the Vermont Court Diversion Program, which allows offenders charged with minor crimes to keep their record clean if they successfully complete a program designed for them by community review boards.

I applaud the innovative diversion models that have emerged in response to community needs, such as Windsor County's Sparrow Project and the rapid intervention efforts in Chittenden County. These programs effectively divert substance abusers from the courts to treatment providers. They have shown very promising results in easing court caseloads, reducing recidivism, and moving addicts towards recovery. These are just a few examples of how communities are working together to identify solutions.

Our witnesses today have devoted much time and energy to breaking the cycle of addiction in our communities. Vermont's U.S. Attorney, Tris Coffin, has taken his message of prevention into Vermont schools, along with the father of a University of Vermont student who died five years ago from a heroin overdose. They relate how addiction hurts not only addicts, but their families, friends and neighbors. Chief Baker is facilitating a community-based response, and his message is clear: Not on our streets; not in our town. Dr. Chen, with his years of experience as an emergency room physician, is working with Governor Shumlin to take the prevention message to our communities and to our schools. Mary Alice McKenzie is working through the Boys & Girls Clubs to respond to the needs of our kids, who want to have positive, healthy, and supportive alternatives to addiction. And the Vermont State Police, under the direction of Col. L'Esperance, and in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health, are using a promising

drug, naloxone [nah-LOX-own], which can immediately reverse the effects of a heroin overdose. This initiative has the potential to not just change the dynamic between law enforcement and the communities they serve, but to save lives.

Vermont has recognized that heroin and opioid addiction is not a problem our small state can ignore. The lessons we have learned here in Vermont are important for the whole nation. I look forward to hearing from all of you working to improve your communities and end the cycle of addiction.

I want to thank Congressman Welch for being here today, for the day an honorary member of this panel. I know he, too, is concerned about this cycle of addiction. I want to also thank the many people here in the audience today. You represent law enforcement and our judicial officers; you are our health professionals and our recovery experts. Here today are education providers and students, civic leaders, veterans and representatives from youth organizations. Government, from the federal, state and local levels is represented here. Everyone here today is the embodiment of this community-minded approach to breaking the cycle.

As a Vermonter, I thank everyone gathered here today for your commitment and dedication to addressing this thorny and complex problem. And as a Vermonter, I'm proud of the ways that we come together to do what needs to be done.

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