

Testimony of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

May 13, 2003

The Committee today holds what has been billed an "oversight" hearing of the Department of Justice, to examine the Department's implementation of Project Safe Neighborhoods. I introduced the legislation in the last Congress that authorized this program - the 21st Century Department of Justice Appropriations Authorization Act - and I look forward to learning about its progress. Despite my interest in this program, however, I do not think this hearing is the best use of the limited time this Committee devotes to exercising its oversight power.

More than two months have passed since Chairman Hatch committed to holding an oversight hearing with FBI Director Mueller to discuss the Bureau's use of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act ("FISA"), in response to urgent bipartisan requests. We are still waiting for this hearing, and I am disappointed that the Chairman has pushed to eliminate the sunset provision in the USA PATRIOT Act before the Committee has fully inquired about how the FISA amendments included in that Act are working.

More recently, the Chairman declined a request that Senators Grassley, Specter and I made for an oversight hearing on the Los Angeles FBI espionage case and its implications for security within the FBI. Security lapses have been a chronic problem for the FBI. The Hanssen case was a stark example of that, and the Los Angeles case seems to be another. It is difficult for me to understand why we cannot find time to come to grips with issues that are jeopardizing our security and hampering our premier domestic intelligence and law enforcement agency. We do not have many duties that are more important than that.

This morning would have been a perfectly good time to hold either of these urgent FBI oversight hearing. Or we could have held a hearing with the Attorney General himself, who has made himself available to this Committee for only three hours - divided among three witnesses - so far this year. Project Safe Neighborhoods is an important initiative, but it is new enough that an oversight hearing would likely have been more productive at a later point in this Congress.

That being said, Project Safe Neighborhoods represents a rare instance of agreement among people with differing views on the gun control debate. In Vermont and around the nation, I hope prosecutors and law enforcement officers will use this program to make our communities safer.

I do believe that it is important, however, that Project Safe Neighborhoods be conducted in conjunction with - and not at the expense of - other important crime-fighting programs. Without substantial funding for the COPS program and first responders generally, I fear that the tremendous gains in crime prevention made during the Clinton Administration will be reversed. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, the crime rate grew by 2 percent in 2001, with a 3 percent increase in murders, and grew by an additional 1.3 percent in the first half of 2002. We have of course seen similar increases in unemployment and the Federal budget deficit during this Administration. As we celebrate Police Week, and mourn those who have lost their lives while protecting the public, we in Congress must ensure that we do all that we can to promote and protect all of our law enforcement officers and other first responders. Project Safe Neighborhoods can and should play a role in this effort, but it cannot be the entire effort.

In conclusion, although there may be more timely matters that this Committee could be investigating, I hope this hearing provides a useful update on the progress of U.S. Attorneys throughout the nation in implementing this program. I appreciate that a number of U.S. Attorneys have taken the time to appear before the Committee, and I value their testimony and the testimony of all of today's witnesses.