

Testimony of

# Mr. Russell Edward Spann

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Senator Hatch, Distinguished Committee Members, and Ladies and Gentlemen. I am honored to appear before this Committee to testify about our efforts to reduce gun violence through Utah's Project Safe Neighborhoods Program. In overview, I express my appreciation to President Bush and Attorney General Ashcroft for their foresight in conceiving this very important program. I thank Senator Hatch for his leadership in bringing this program to Utah. I also thank the Honorable Paul Warner, United States Attorney for Utah, for his dedication and success in uniting Utah law enforcement and prosecuting agencies at all levels throughout Utah. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), as the host agency for the PSN Law Enforcement Task Force, provides guidance, resources, and training all of which insures this program is successful. Finally, I am grateful to the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, for their tireless dedication to grant programs, which have made Project Safe Neighborhoods accessible to law enforcement agencies throughout the country. Continued federal funding is critical to the survival of the Project Safe Neighborhoods Initiative.

I am a Captain with the West Valley City Police Department and presently serve as the Commander of the ATF-Project Safe Neighborhoods Gun Task Force in Utah. Over the past 26 years, I have worked in a variety of law enforcement assignments, including, undercover narcotics, SWAT operations, investigations, and patrol. In 2002, I was Venue Commander for the Winter Olympic Ice Hockey Games. I have also served in a number of Task Forces at the Federal, State, and Local levels. I am pleased to inform you that cooperation between law enforcement agencies in Utah has been achieved at the highest attainable levels. The Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force thrives on that cooperation.

For me, gun violence is a very personal issue. In May, 1991, I was shot during a SWAT entry of a drug dealer's home. Another officer on the same raid was also shot, and survived only because he was wearing a bulletproof vest. In August, 1997, West Valley Police Detective Robert Idle was shot 7 times by a parolee. Remarkably, Detective Idle survived. On June 3, 1999, Murray Police Officer Russ Huff was shot 4 times by an armed parolee fleeing from a bank with methamphetamine and a stolen, forged check. Officer Huff survived. In August, 2001, Lehi Police Officer Joe Adams was shot and killed while attempting to arrest a drug suspect with an outstanding misdemeanor warrant. On July 6, 2001, Roosevelt Police Chief, and my dearest friend, Cecil Gurr was murdered by a meth user. On November 19, 2002, West Jordan Police Officer Ron Wood was shot and killed by a juvenile with a .40 caliber semi-automatic pistol during a foot pursuit.

The most shocking aspect of these deaths is that the murder guns were either stolen or used in previous crimes. In each one of these murders, the shooter illegally possessed the gun when he pointed it at a police officer. Memories of these officers' sacrifices haunt me, and fuel my determination to make the Project Safe Neighborhoods Program succeed. The common denominators in each of these tragic examples are guns and drugs. The lethal combination of rim fire rage, gunpowder, and methamphetamine in Utah homes has a synergistic effect on domestic violence. Nationally, domestic violence murders account for 11% of all homicides. In Utah, more than 45% of all homicides are domestic violence related. NIJ reports that Salt Lake County has one of the highest per capita consumption rates for methamphetamine, and that meth is the number one drug of choice for Utah women. Add to that fact that 65% of all domestic violence in Utah is meth-related, and the proliferation of domestic gun violence is self-evident.

The Project Safe Neighborhoods Gun Task Force is Utah's best hope of interdicting gun violence generated by these risk factors. This Task Force is unique from several perspectives. Unlike many specialized task forces that receive information and open a confidential investigation, our Task Force embraces the local police officer and invites him to participate throughout the investigation. Often times, the local officer who develops the information, also participates in the arrest of the gun violator. We view our Task Force as a nurturing relationship with state, county, and local law enforcement. Our Task Force officers mentor the local officer who originally detects gun crime or gun-related violence. This officer retains ownership of the case and thus has a vested interest in its outcome in court. Each case has, and will create a long- term partnership between the Task Force, the local agency, and the individual officer. The mission of the Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force is expressed through three different priorities. They hold

equal importance in reducing gun violence in Utah. One priority is Message. Through our sister Media Outreach Programs funded by BJA, we have developed a message that will educate the public about gun violence risk factors and how to report gun crimes before they escalate into violence. This educational process has made the general public and potential jurors aware of the serious nature of illegal gun trafficking and gun possession.

Another priority is Training. I am proud to inform this Committee that the Utah Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force has trained almost 1,000 federal, state, county, and local police officers through the State during its first year of operation. Training includes basic recognition, reporting, gun tracing, and federal laws and penalties. The message of the Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force is amplified through each of these officers who attend our training.

The third priority is Enforcement. The Utah Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force subscribes to the "One Gun-One Crook" enforcement theory. The federal indictments that Mr. Paul Warner outlined for you are replete with examples where a single offender with one gun was responsible for horrific gun violence. Our experience demonstrates that the federal approach is the only sensible approach to these violators. Local police departments are frustrated with repeat offenders who are arrested numerous times on drug, domestic violence, and felony crimes but who rarely spend time in jail, even if convicted. In one southeastern Utah case, a drug user was arrested 10 times for a number of crimes including, drug use, domestic violence threats, and burglary. In State Court, he received a sentence of 6 months for the combined charges. A single ATF-Project Safe Neighborhoods Task Force gun possession case involving the same defendant could result in a 36-month sentence which will eliminate this public safety threat from the community. The effectiveness of a federal, "One Gun-One Crook" strategy is expressed in the following numbers. Since January of this year, 112 of the 199 gun cases screened at the U.S. Attorney's Office named offenders who currently are, or previously have been on probation or parole from the Utah State Prison.

We treat every case we work with a local agency as a long-term partnership. The Task Force has a demonstrated ability to reach each one of the 110 police agencies in Utah, many of whom lack the resources to conduct sophisticated gun trafficking cases. During the first year alone, the Task Force has already worked cases with 62 of these agencies in every geographic region of the state.

Finally, this Task Force has the ability and the resources to follow guns and their traffickers across any jurisdictional boundary. Two stolen firearms in possession of two different felons were tracked to three different Utah counties. Ten guns stolen during one burglary in one Utah county were tracked to Texas, New Mexico, and two different counties in Utah.

I reaffirm my belief that the National Project Safe Neighborhoods Program, and the Utah Project Safe Neighborhoods Gun Task Force is this nation's best hope of reducing gun violence. Indeed, every case of "One Crook with One Gun" may ultimately become one finger on one trigger causing one more senseless death. We are dedicated to the initiative that removes any gun from any crook's hand. Your continued support of this program will help us in that mission.

Thank you. I would be honored to answer any questions you may have.