

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
February 27, 2008

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Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Supporting the Front Line in the Fight Against Crime: Restoring Federal Funding for State and Local Law Enforcement"
Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs
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For years, State and local law enforcement officers have been stretched thin. They have faced continuous cuts in federal funding under this administration, but have nonetheless been charged with new and increased counterterrorism responsibilities since September 11, 2001. Violent crime has been on the rise in recent years, especially in rural areas, yet time and time again, we are hearing that our State and local law enforcement officers are unable to fill department vacancies due to a lack of funding for critical positions.

Last week, the Rutland Herald reported that there is currently a 10 percent vacancy rate among State police officers nationwide. The Vermont State Police, like many in other states, face a real problem with unfilled vacancies. The trend is unacceptable. I am glad that Senator Biden is holding this important hearing to address the needs of our State and local law enforcement agencies.

A primary concern of mine is the weakening of the important Community Oriented Policing Services program, or COPS. Disturbingly, we have seen a steady and significant decline in the funds appropriated and spent in connection with the COPS program. At its start, the program increased police presence on the streets, and by all accounts aided in the steady decline in the national crime rate in the 1990s. In fact, between 1994 and 2001, violent crime dropped by 29 percent. And, in 2005, the GAO recognized that the COPS program had been an effective tool in reducing violent crime.

Yet, despite proven successes, the Bush administration has systematically dismantled critical support programs for local law enforcement. Beginning with President Bush's first year in office, the administration has proposed consistent cuts to COPS, and in fact has gone so far as to propose to completely do away with the COPS program, eliminating opportunities to build on its already documented successes, and squandering the gains made in the early years of the COPS program.

We have been trying to reverse this trend. This Congress and this Committee have been taking important steps to show our support for our nation's law enforcement officers. In May, the Senate

Judiciary Committee voted to report the COPS Improvement Act of 2007, a bill I was proud to introduce with Senator Biden. Despite tremendous support for this legislation, a Republican objection to passing the House version of this bill has prevented this important legislation from passing the Senate. I hope the objection is soon withdrawn.

This legislation would reauthorize and expand the ability of the Attorney General to award grants aimed at increasing the number of cops on the streets and in our schools. In Vermont, for example, passage of the COPS Improvement Act would likely mean that 110 new police officers would be put on the streets in our communities. Additionally, the COPS Improvement Act would authorize funds for district attorneys to hire community prosecutors, and for law enforcement technology grants. The COPS program has been a resounding success, and the proposed improvements to the program would help our State and local law enforcement agencies cope with the substantial reductions in funding they have endured in recent years.

I am also a longtime supporter of the Edward Byrne Memorial Assistance Grant Program. Byrne funding is the backbone of drug enforcement and prosecution efforts in Vermont. Over the years, Vermont has been able to support a broad spectrum of projects within corrections, courts, training, forensics, and domestic violence and victim services as a result of the Byrne grant program.

Despite the effectiveness of these programs, in his 2009 budget proposal, the President did not just suggest cuts to COPS and Byrne, as he has in the past, but targeted these two effective programs for elimination. This week, Senator Specter and I sent a letter to the Senate Budget Committee strongly opposing these and other cuts to State and local law enforcement funding. I ask that a copy of our letter be inserted in the Record.

The administration's budget proposal signals that once again the needs of local law enforcement are trumped by the failed policy in Iraq. No expense is too large to equip the Iraqi police force. But to fund police forces at home is too onerous. For what we spending Iraq in just three and half days, this administration could fully fund the COPS program, putting 8,000 new police officers on the streets to make our communities safer. It is just one further example of the skewed priorities of this administration.

Funding is not the only resource our Federal government is denying our State and local law enforcement agencies. Just yesterday, the Wall Street Journal reported that an internal report of the Department of Homeland Security found that our State and local agencies are often denied crucial intelligence information they need to help keep our communities safe. Our law enforcement agencies deserve better.

We must give local law enforcement the resources they need, and we must make sure that the Federal Government is doing its part. We must fund and encourage more prevention programs, particularly for young people, which can reach kids before they turn to crime and keep all of us safer. I look forward to hearing from today's distinguished witnesses, including Senators Harkin and Chambliss, and leaders of important law enforcement entities about how we can best address the problem of rising crime.

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