

Testimony of
Hal Colston

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
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Senator Leahy and Senator Specter:

It is my pleasure and privilege to appear before this committee to discuss the rise of drug-related violent crime in rural America and how to find solutions to this growing problem. My testimony will focus on prevention with an understanding of the importance of treatment and law enforcement.

I have lived in Essex Junction, VT since 1989 after moving here from Philadelphia, PA with my wife and three children who are now grown adults. The human scale and quality of life in Vermont has been very important to me as a parent and citizen. But, the proliferation of drug use and the related violent crime has given me pause as of late. I have witnessed how drug abuse violently tears apart families.

I believe it is important to go upstream to understand why the demand for drugs continues to increase. And, especially among the young people in our community. As long as demand for drugs is brisk, there will be drug dealers lined up ten deep to meet this demand. In my view drug dealers are people who have lost hope. Some of them may come from out of state to capitalize on this opportunity, but dealers would not be in business unless there is a demand. Our recent Youth Risk Behavior report prepared by our Department of Health has shown that marijuana use has shown a slight decline yet the report did not measure abuse of prescription drugs which can lead to hard, addictive drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and oxycontin. How do we deal with the consumption side of this problem?

I feel we do a disservice to our teenagers by creating a cliff-effect for the 14 to 16 year olds during the summer months. They don't qualify for summer recreational programs and they are not old enough to work. So, they tend to drop out of sight and are left to their own devices unless families have the resources to put them through endless summer camps, providing them with healthy activities. Yet, the reality is that many families cannot afford this option. When our young people abuse drugs at such a young age, they risk their emotional development. Peer pressure becomes a powerful force that can keep our children trapped into abusing drugs.

This is compounded when our young people who experiment with and abuse drugs go back to school in the fall. Studies have shown that the most dangerous time during the school day is from 2:30 pm to 5:30 pm. Many parents are at work and our children may be home alone if they are not involved with extra-curricular activities at school or part-time work. Without structure for

healthy activities and clear boundaries for behavior, it's no surprise to me how our kids get onto a path of abusing drugs. How do we deal with this side of the problem?

Why not shift the school day to begin at 9 am and end at 5 pm. This would eliminate the vulnerable time of the day when we give adolescents the opportunity to exercise risky behavior. Studies have shown that under the typical school day students on average do not get sufficient sleep losing rest for a vigorous day at school. The unintended consequence of a change such as this could improve school performance and decrease drug use.

It really does take a village to support our children. And that village must include all of its parents. Living in an affluent community I have seen how parents are stretched between career and family. And, the outcome is that parents become isolated from one another as we try to keep pace with making a living and providing for our families. It becomes too difficult for parents to act together.

A typical scenario is that a parent or parents plan to leave town for the weekend and have the child spend the weekend with a friend. An empty house that no other parents may know about. Before you know it, a get together is planned without any of the parents speaking to one another. We get hoodwinked and our teenagers get a chance to have an out of control party fueled by drugs. How can our community deal with this side of the problem?

What all of us parents have in common are our schools. Perhaps the schools can bring parents together at middle school to learn how to act together for the well-being of our children. Parents Acting Together could partner with the schools to learn how and why strategies for communicating with one another are important. This associational relationship could provide the opportunity for building meaningful relationships.

There are families in our community with parents who are recovering from drug addiction lacking associational relationships. How can such a family get support so their children don't repeat their experiences of self-destruction? I direct a new non-profit in Chittenden County called NeighborKeepers with a vision to break the bonds of poverty one family at a time. In my view poverty is surviving with a lack of resources such as financial, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and role models. We employ the Circles of Support model and practice radical hospitality by creating a community where families befriend allies who help them accomplish their dreams and goals. Typically three allies comprise a Circle of Support and learn to "do with" as opposed to "do for" their new friends. Not only are the families transformed but the allies are also as they learn how barriers and policies keep people trapped with a lack of resources. Ultimately, our community benefits as marginalized families are able to increase the social capital.

NeighborKeepers has two families in our Circles of Support community with parents who are recovering addicts. I have watched them come alive with their new friends and a new sense of purpose - understanding that they too have something to give back. At NeighborKeepers we teach reciprocity which is critical for healthy relationships and critical for building healthy communities.

In conclusion, I believe that we must think out of the box to find solutions to drug-related violent crime in rural America. We need to focus on the needs of our children and families which are the building blocks of a healthy community. If we can replace their isolation with meaningful activities and relationships, we can make tomorrow brighter for all. For me Dr. James Comer of Yale University says it all, "No significant learning can take place without a significant relationship." It is all about relationships. Thank you.