

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
March 24, 2008

Statement Of Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),

Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,

Hearing On "The Rise Of Drug-Related Violent Crime In Rural America:
Finding Solutions To A Growing Problem"

Rutland, Vermont

March 24, 2008

Today the Senate Judiciary Committee has come to my home state of Vermont to hear from the people of Rutland about the persistent problem of drug-related violent crime in rural communities. This is a crisis that we have felt acutely here in Vermont, and particularly in Rutland, but that is also being felt throughout America.

The myth is still alive that drug abuse and drug-related crime are only big-city problems. The fact is that Rural America is also coping with these issues. We need a fresh look at drug crime through the lens of the experience of smaller cities and rural communities, and bringing the Senate Judiciary Committee here will give Congress a perspective that will help shape better solutions.

In Rutland, a public-spirited community with creative leadership is not satisfied with the status quo. That makes Rutland's experience and ideas all the more valuable to other communities that are confronting these same issues.

I am glad that so many people who care about and work on these issues have joined us today as we explore how to fix this problem, including federal and state officials, local law enforcement leaders, educators, experts in prevention and treatment, concerned parents and members of the community.

I also want to thank Senator Specter for making the trip to Vermont. He and I have both cared deeply about fighting crime since our days as prosecutors, and we both understand that violent

crime is a major issue for smaller cities and rural communities like those throughout Vermont and many parts of Pennsylvania, just as it is in big cities.

The numbers alone are reason enough for concern. The Vermont Crime Information Center says that reported crimes in Vermont rose 5.7 percent from 2005 to 2006, after having declined for several years. Violent crime in Vermont rose nearly 10 times the national average - a stark increase consistent with what has been happening in rural areas around the country.

Recent events have brought the dry statistics of crime rates into stark relief. Rutland has seen four drug-related shootings since November. On February 4, 2008, two men were shot, one fatally, on Grove Street in Rutland City in a drug deal gone bad.

The problems Rutland has encountered are like those seen across the country in communities large and small. Rutland is showing leadership in addressing those problems, and Rutland is a community that is interested in solutions. The town has responded, as Vermonters always do, by working together and joining forces to tackle this problem. Local leaders have met to discuss new ways to improve safety, and individuals and companies have donated money to help provide overtime funding for Rutland police officers. Those ideas and experiences can be useful to other communities elsewhere. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this multi-faceted problem.

Law enforcement is a vital piece of any plan to reduce violence. The Rutland Police Department and law enforcement throughout Vermont have worked extremely hard to respond to and prevent violence, and they have often been successful. But for years, in Vermont and elsewhere, state and local law enforcement have been stretched thin as they shoulder both traditional crime-fighting duties and new homeland security demands. They have faced continuous cuts in federal funding under the current administration, and time and time again, our state and local law enforcement officers, like the Vermont State Police and the Rutland Police Department and their counterparts in other states, have been unable to fill department vacancies. The trend is unacceptable.

We have made some progress. Since 2001, I have worked to secure federal funding in the Justice Department budget, including \$1 million this year, for the Vermont Drug Task Force, which has played an essential role in cracking down on increased drug activity throughout the state, which many communities lack the resources to do on their own.

We have also had setbacks. At the height of its funding, the Community Oriented Policing Services, or COPS, program, increased our police presence on the streets, and by all accounts aided in the steady decline in the national crime rate in the 1990s. But beginning with President Bush's first year in office, the administration has significantly cut the COPS program, and violent crime has once again been on the rise. Byrne-Justice Assistance Grants are unique in enabling and encouraging cross-jurisdictional solutions to preventing and fighting crime. Vermont's own Drug Task Force is a prime example of the Byrne-JAG approach. Yet funding has fallen

dramatically since 2002, from \$900 million to \$170 million this year. These cuts directly hit local police. Funding cuts have also hit the Crime-Free Rural States grant program, which was last funded through the ten million dollars I was able to secure in the 2003 omnibus appropriations bill. Since then, funding for this important program to help local communities prevent and reduce crime, violence and substance abuse has been eliminated.

We are working to reverse these trends, but we must do more. I will keep fighting to restore the COPS, Byrne-JAG, and Crime-Free Rural States programs, as well as other proven federal programs that help police officers who are in the trenches, fighting crime.

While I have always pushed for serious punishment for serious crimes, I also know well that law enforcement alone will not solve the problem of violence in our communities. I have long advocated an approach to crime with equal attention to law enforcement, prevention and education, and treatment. The best way to prevent crime is often to provide young people with opportunities and constructive things to do, so they stay away from crime and drugs altogether. When people get involved with drugs, treatment often works better than punishment alone to turn people away from crime. Regrettably, this administration has consistently sought to reduce funding for prevention and treatment programs.

Perhaps the most important component in dealing with this crucial problem is collaboration. We see results when we have people working together at the local, state, and federal levels, and in the law enforcement, prevention, and treatment fields. We have seen that success in Vermont. I hope that today we can start to figure out what kinds of approaches have worked best and how to build upon them, and how we can work together to bring real solutions to Rutland, to Vermont, and to Rural America.

It is great that we have with us today such a distinguished group of witnesses who can discuss the problem and propose solutions from the valuable perspectives of law enforcement, education, prevention, and treatment. I look forward to your testimony.

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