

Testimony of
Mary Moran

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US Senate Judiciary Committee Field Hearing Testimony

March 24, 2009 - Rutland, Vermont

"The Rise of Drug-Related Violent Crime in Rural America:
Finding Solutions to a Growing Problem"

Thank you so much Senator Leahy and Senator Specter for bringing this Field Hearing to Rutland. We certainly do appreciate the time and effort that the Senators and their staff members have put into being here as you seek to learn more about us and assist our community and state. I hope that what is considered here today will also inform the discussion of this very real problem in other rural areas throughout our nation.

I am sure that my colleagues representing law enforcement will speak to the specifics of recent events in Rutland and Vermont as a whole. I would like to focus on the "finding solutions" elements in the title of the hearing.

First, and I cannot stress this enough, we have great working relationships between and among departments and agencies in here in Rutland; this is a community strength. The schools, the police department under Chief Bossi's leadership, the fire service, Rutland Mental Health, the Rutland Regional Medical Center, the courts and diversion program, the Department of Children and Families, the Boys & Girls Club (which started as a school developed youth program eleven years ago and has grown into a full service B&GC in downtown), all work well together to support our children and families and the health and safety of all in our community.

Yet, we still have great needs to address.

Of particular concern is the rise in the population in our Early Essential Education Program (EEE), which serves disabled three and four year olds. These numbers have increased from 37 in 1998, to 41 in 2003, to 75 in 2008. Many of these children are physically and medically challenged; some are developmentally delayed; some have autism. So, why do I mention this population as we speak about drugs and crime? It is because we believe that an increasing number of these children are coming to us impaired because of drug use. Yes, we have crack babies in Vermont, as well as children who suffer from the results of fetal alcohol syndrome. Some question why we must serve these children. Well, we must do so because of state and federal mandates; but, more important, they must be cared for and educated. Helping these children and families as early as possible gives hope for their future development and success in life. Arguing about whether the Agency of Human Services or the public schools should provide these services, and where the resulting costs fall or funding comes from, does little to help a

struggling young mother. At the federal level, assistance should also be a priority, for instance, in the area of Health & Human Services funding for children's mental health services.

Directly related to the issue of these babies' needs and the growth of drug use and violence is our shared concern about the lack of services that are available for youth in the age 14 to 18 range. It is these young people who are often most susceptible to those, mostly, as Chief Bossi tells me, who come from "away," who prey on the more vulnerable in our community as they ply their drug/thug trade. Disaffected young women are particularly at risk, as the recent events in Rutland would seem to indicate. This high-risk group needs more attention, at home, in school, and in the form of more services from the Department of Children & Families, safe respite housing, or more available foster care.

So, what's working well in Rutland?

In the schools, we have excellent health and counseling services and, as mention above, a close affiliation with the programs and services of Rutland Mental Health. For many of our children and families, the health unit at school is the first line of medical care. We have highly trained and experienced nurses and counselors in each school who provide assistance and support to families as well as children. These services are largely supported by state and federal Medicaid funds, which, as you know, are also at risk. As these sources of financial support are either level funded or cut, we will face the daunting choice of having the local taxpayer assume more of these vital costs, or being forced to cut these essential programs. As Chair of the Board of Trustees at the Rutland Regional Medical, I also know the impact that the reduction of school nursing and counseling services would have on the Rutland Mental Health Services and the Emergency Department at RRMC, both community resources that also face significant cuts in Medicaid funding.

A great success story is that of the 21st Century Learning Center programs in our region: the Tapestry Program which serves Rutland City, West Rutland, Proctor and Rutland Town, and the SOAR Program in Brandon for the communities served by the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union. Tapestry, a nationally recognized and award winning program, serves well over 600 children from three to six PM each day as well as in comprehensive summer programming. Both Tapestry and SOAR provide remedial and tutorial services, enrichment and recreation, health and counseling, field trips and cultural experiences, and... a healthy lunch and snack. An independent outside evaluation has indicated that the Tapestry Program has supported our children's academic performance, and that participation clearly provides a safe and healthy experience for our kids. Unfortunately, the future of the 21st Century Learning Centers Program is at grave risk; major funding cuts and movement to an inefficient and unpredictable voucher program are currently being considered in Washington.

Research tells us that the most dangerous time of day for children and youth is from three to six in the afternoon. That is why, in addition to Tapestry, the Rutland City Board of School Commissioners has consistently supported an extensive co-curricular program in the arts, activities and athletics. Kids who are actively engaged with caring adults are far less likely to become involved in drug use and crime. In addition, we have an active collaboration with the Boys & Girls Club of Rutland County, as mentioned above. We have just submitted, and are hopeful of receiving, a new grant, which will increase the collaborative work between the B&GC

and Tapestry. The Mentor Connector is another grant funded local program that matches adult advisors with local young people to develop and support positive relationships and healthy choices.

Finally, let me mention one of the most successful collaborative programs in our City: the COPS or School Resource Officer Program. Under the leadership of Chief Tony Bossi and Captain Scott Tucker, we have worked with the police department in the training of both school administrators and police officers in this most positive program. Our three SROs are more than police officers; they are mentors, teachers, counselors, family service interventionists, beat cops, and friends to the children and youth of this City. They work closely with our teachers, administrators and school counselors as we seek to assist both children and their families. They provide safe home visits as well as health and safety checks when necessary. They are a visible presence in our schools when they are in session, and on the streets of downtown during vacation periods. Kids know and like them; they are a great resource in our community.

Now, I might sound like a broken record here, but this program is also at risk as we speak. Safe & Drug Free Schools funding has been significantly reduced, as have the grant funds available for the COPS Program from the Department of Justice.

Given the time allowed, I have attempted to help to define the needs as well as celebrate some of the successes in our community. Once again, on behalf of the children and families of Rutland City, thank you for being here today to consider this very important topic.

Respectfully Submitted,

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