

Testimony of  
**Tom Tremblay**

March 24, 2008

STATEMENT

OF

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VERMONT COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC SAFETY

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
UNITED STATES SENATE

CONCERNING

"THE RISE OF DRUG-RELATED VIOLENT CRIME IN RURAL AMERICA: FINDING  
SOLUTIONS TO A GROWING PROBLEM"

Field Hearing - Rutland, Vermont - March 24, 2008

Statement of Thomas R. Tremblay, Vermont Commissioner of Public Safety, before the  
Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, concerning "the Rise of Drug-Related Violent  
Crime in Rural America: Finding Solutions to a Growing Problem, March 24, 2008.

Chairman Leahy and members of the Judiciary Committee, I am Tom Tremblay, Commissioner  
of Public Safety for the State of Vermont, appointed by Governor James Douglas in January of  
2008. I accepted the position as Public Safety Commissioner while in my twenty-fifth year of  
service with the Burlington, Vermont Police Department, where I was serving in my fifth year as  
Chief of Police.

I am honored to appear before you to share my experiences as a veteran of Vermont Law  
Enforcement, to help address the concerns regarding the "Rise of Drug-Related Violent Crime in  
Rural America." While Vermont still remains one of the safest states in the country, we know too  
well that we are not immune from drug-related violence and other crimes associated with drug  
abuse and addiction. In fact, we are experiencing a change in criminal behavior that shows a  
concerning trend involving a propensity for violence, to include the use of firearms in what  
appears to be growing criminal / drug enterprises coming to Vermont, and existing within  
Vermont. Citizens suffering from the effects of drug abuse and addiction that prey on Vermonters

to fund their drug habits are committing other crimes that are clearly impacting our safety, wellness, and the Vermont way of life.

The drug related crime and violence in Rutland that has been well publicized is just the most recent evidence of the challenges that Vermont Law Enforcement is facing. I offer the following examples of other drug related cases, violence and criminal behavior that Vermont is experiencing:

#### Barre, VT - Saunders Homicide - September 2006

Three local juveniles in the Barre City area that were identified as low level marijuana dealers that was associated with Mr. Saunders. An initial confrontation related to a drug rip off involving Saunders resulted in Saunders being sought out by other individuals involved in drug dealing that were also associated with the juveniles. The juveniles conspired with the others to kill Saunders and were present when Saunders was beaten to death. Saunders body was buried disposed of in a shallow grave. All three juveniles admitted that Saunders death was related to a bad drug deal.

The Saunders homicide and other drug related crime and violence led to a three month investigation by the Vermont Drug Task Force (VTDTF), Vermont State Police and Barre Police Department, as well as other local, county, and federal agencies. The investigation in Barre, dubbed "Operation Granite Streets," uncovered an extensive narcotics distribution system.

Utilizing undercover officers and cooperating individuals over 30 individuals were arrested facing charges ranging from Crack, Heroin and Powder Cocaine sales, to conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine, and various firearms violations. Charges related to these cases were prosecuted through the Vermont Attorney General and the Vermont U.S. Attorney's office. Some of the individuals under investigation had criminal records dating back five decades.

#### Chittenden / Addison County - Armed Robbery Spree - January through February 2007

5 armed armed-robberies of convenience stores where the perpetrator was disguised by wearing a backward sweatshirt with a hood that had eye holes cut out of the back of it ("Backwards Bandit"). Four people were eventually arrested and U.S. Attorney Tom Anderson prosecuted federally under the Hobbs Act. Defendants confessed that the crimes were committed to obtain money for drugs and drug addiction. The drugs included Oxycontin, Cocaine, and Marijuana. The main perpetrator (Maskell) confessed to drug abuse and addiction beginning with marijuana use at age 13.

#### St Albans, VT and Franklin County - Crime Spree - July through December 2007

Three armed home Invasions, a shooting, a bank robbery, an assault with a firearm and one Pharmacy Burglary. These incidents are directly related to drugs, specifically crack cocaine or prescription drugs, as well as other illegal drug activity. Suspects in some of these cases are linked to out of state, including New York.

#### Poultney, VT - Bank Robbery - February 2008

A lone male subject walked into the Citizens Bank on Main St in the town of Poultney, VT and handed a note to one of the female tellers. The note advised he had a gun and wanted all the money from her cash drawer. The suspect made off with \$2,298. A vehicle with Delaware plates was seen leaving the scene. Hours later the suspect vehicle was stopped by a New Jersey Police

in Mahwah, NJ. A search of the vehicle led to the discovery of marijuana, oxycontin, and cash from the robbery. The suspect and his accomplice confessed to traveling to Vermont from Delaware to meet a friend for a drug related purpose. The suspect and his accomplice also admitted to the bank robbery as they needed to support their drug abuse and addiction problems.

### Vermont Drug Trends

Drug Investigators are currently seeing an enormous increase in both cocaine trafficking and use across the state. They are investigating numerous targets for distribution of multi-ounce and pound level amounts of cocaine. The demand for cocaine is equally as significant across all regions of the state. Almost all cocaine coming into Vermont is in powder form. The quantity of cocaine immediately available for sale in state has increased significantly in the past several years. Most dealers are selling it as powder on the street; however a few dealers cook the cocaine into crack once it arrives in state. This is a trend that has been going on for a few years and it is directly related to the significant penalties defendants faced in federal court for crack cocaine related offenses.

The other significant drug increase in Vermont is the abuse and distribution of prescription narcotics. The illegal sale of prescription narcotics is prolific and drugs such as OxyContin have taken the place of heroin for many addicts. Prescription drugs are easier to obtain and offer a "cleaner" high than heroin. There is also a general belief among young people that these drugs are safer because they are prescribed by doctors. Last year the majority of overdose deaths in Vermont were prescription drugs. Lastly, we are beginning to see the emergence of methamphetamine laced ecstasy pills from Canada. These pills are sparse but do exist in Vermont.

Marijuana continues to be one of the most prolific illicit drugs in Vermont and is responsible for black market sales in the tens of millions of dollars, most of which ends up in the hands of organized crime and outlaw motorcycle gangs.

The Drug Task Force has begun to focus a great deal of energy targeting significant dealers and has seized countless assets in an attempt to dismantle their drug networks. It is believed that this approach is successful and will provide greater results in the future. One of the biggest concerns that investigators have currently is that jail sentences for drug crimes at the state level are diminishing to the point where people no longer fear punishment over working with the police. As a result, our ability to cultivate informants has been hampered slightly with various levels of offenders.

### Out of State Drug Sources -

Vermont has been plagued with out of state drug dealers coming to Vermont to exploit higher profit margins than they can achieve in the source cities / states from where they reside. Investigations in Vermont have linked many suspects involved in drugs and drug related crime as coming from states such as New Hampshire, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Delaware to name a few. Investigations have suggested that some drug dealers travel to Vermont as a place to hide when they are under suspicion for drug dealing where they reside.

Investigations have also suggested that drug dealers coming to Vermont may view Vermont as a place where they can take over the drug market, are less likely to get caught, and if they do get

caught, they are less likely to receive serious consequences. Some of these suspects have been tied to gang activity in other states.

## "FINDING SOLUTIONS TO A GROWING PROBLEM"

### Law Enforcement cooperation:

Vermont is fortunate to have dedicated and professional law enforcement officers that all understand the need for cooperative law enforcement. All local, county and state law enforcement officers receive the same training at the same police academy. Law enforcement leaders throughout the state model cooperative law enforcement in our efforts to address crime and disorder in our communities. Our Federal Law Enforcement partners join us in the same spirit of cooperation. Cooperation between our County Prosecutors, Vermont State Attorney General Bill Sorrell, and U.S. Attorney Tom Anderson ensures that each case is appropriately prosecuted in State or Federal Court.

### Vermont Drug Task Force (VTDTF)

The Vermont Drug Task Force (VTDTF) is one example of cooperative law enforcement in Vermont that has been very successful. The VTDTF a multi-agency group of investigators comprised of state, county and local officers funded largely through federal dollars. In existence since 1987, the mission of the task force must continually expand and develop in an effort to address the increasing threat of drug distribution, the associated crime and violence that impacts the quality of life and safety of Vermonters.

There are currently twenty three members assigned to the Task Force working in various capacities, to include investigative and support roles. Fifteen members (over 60%) are either funded 100% with federal dollars or their positions are backfilled with federal dollars. Three local positions are funded with the state grant known as Community Drug Interdiction Program (CDIP) and the remaining five are funded directly from the state police budget. The federal funding, which also accounts for 90% of the Task Force operating and equipment costs, is always considered volatile and usually allows for the task force to forecast an eighteen month spending plan. The current federal funding spending plan could expire on or about July 1st, 2009.

In order to properly address public safety, as it relates to current drug and the associated crime and violence, one of the goals should be to expand the task force model beyond two units allowing for more aggressive investigation into covert distribution investigations and overt importation/interdiction investigations.

Prescription drug abuse and diversion investigations along with a robust highway interdiction program must play a role in the future of the Drug Task Force. Violence in our communities, associated with drugs being imported from bordering states into Vermont for distribution, as well as our Northern Border's vulnerability to the influx of high grade marijuana delivered into Vermont for re-distribution throughout New England and the East Coast cannot be ignored.

The Vermont multi-agency investigative approach is and continues to be the most effective means of addressing drug importation and distribution in our state. Federal Funding and State resources must continue for this multi-agency task force to ensure the continued success, and to ensure the protection and safety of the people of Vermont from drug related crime and violence.

### Recent Efforts of the Vermont Drug Task Force (VTDTF)

During any given time the VTDTF has approximately forty - fifty open drug investigations. In January and February of 2008 alone the VTDTF has arrested twenty-two individuals resulting in ninety-seven drug related criminal charges and the following drug seizures:

? 1 Kilo Cocaine Harvey, Harvey, Beauchamps, Verdiner

? 7 Lbs. Marijuana Bradbury Case

? 17 Oz Cocaine Saldi Case

? 22 Lbs. Marijuana Saldi Case

? 8 Oz Cocaine Blaise Case

? 22.5 grams Cocaine Blaise Case

? 1 ¼ LB Cocaine NO NAME

(See also the attached press release regarding "Operation Byrne Blitz")

Just last week the VTDTF joined DEA in Springfield MA in a successful undercover buy bust operation which resulted in the seizure of ½ Kilo of Cocaine (17 oz). A 2006 Honda Pilot SUV with a hidden drug compartment has been seized. This case resulted in an arrest of a female from Springfield, MA and her supplier from Connecticut. Investigation determined that over four kilos of cocaine was distributed in the greater Burlington area in past several months.

### Aggressive Enforcement / Adapting our Strategies to Combat the Changes

Aggressive enforcement must continue to be a part of our strategy. Maintaining the current level of staffing and even expanding the VTDTF must be a part of that plan. Aggressive enforcement initiatives by highly trained personnel must be done professionally, respectfully, and without bias, to ensure equal protection and the constitutional rights of all involved.

When criminals change their behaviors and crime patterns, law enforcement too must change. Police leaders must encourage creative problem solving and support new initiatives that will help identify drug dealing and the associated crime before it becomes infested within a community.

Burlington's Neighborhood Interdiction Program is one example of that. Suspected Drug dealers are confronted by police immediately, as opposed to waiting weeks or months to develop a prosecutable case. This can result in criminal charges, or simply send a clear message to the suspected drug dealer that they are being closely watched and they are not welcome in the community.

Working with out of state drug units and our federal partners to ensure that out of state drug sources are being aggressively pursued is important. We must also develop a media or messaging campaign to help send a clear message that Vermont is not a safe haven for drug dealers. These initiatives and others require human resources so that Vermont Law Enforcement can stay ahead of the problem.

### Crime Analysis and Problem Solving

Adapting our strategies to identify drug related crime and violence before it occurs requires the necessary technology, tools and human resources to help. Technology systems designed to ensure that law enforcement information is shared and analyzed between all aspects of federal, state, and local law enforcement, and the criminal justice system, to include the courts, Corrections and Probation and Parole. Radio communication systems that will allow law enforcement officers to

communicate throughout the state as drug investigations tend to travel quickly from one jurisdiction to the next. Information sharing and radio communication projects are in the works but the need for additional funding is still necessary.

#### Drug Education, Treatment, Enforcement and Rehabilitation (DETER)

We should all recognize that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem. There has to be an equal or greater effort at reducing drug abuse and addiction through education, treatment and rehabilitation. Governor Douglas has established the DETER program in Vermont. DETER stands for Drug Education, Treatment, Enforcement and Rehabilitation. A balance of these efforts is helping but there is more work to be done.

#### Byrne / JAG Grant Funding

Reduction in federal funding is concerning to law enforcement across the country. Vermont is no exception, in fact rural states are impacted significantly by these reductions. Restored funding of Byrne / JAG is essential to our state, our law enforcement effort and the safety of all Vermonters.

I want to again thank you for the honor of sharing my experiences and that of the dedicated women and men of the Vermont Law Enforcement Community. I welcome any questions the members of the committee may have.