

Statement of

# The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
May 13, 2008

Statement Of Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing On "The Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Program:  
Protecting our Nation's Law Enforcement Officers"  
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I am pleased to convene today's hearing about the Bulletproof Vest Partnership grant program during National Police Week. I thank our witnesses for taking time during this week of important events and meaningful ceremonies to appear before this Committee and share their experiences with us, to help us better understand the importance of body armor for our peace officers.

This week, law enforcement officers from around the country come to Washington to honor the men and women who have given their lives in the line of service over the past year. All Americans join in gratitude to the officers and their families. I hope today's hearing will add to the recognition of the tremendously important jobs you all do, and that Congress and the American people will take the time to reflect upon the sacrifices too many have made. I know I speak for all Americans in thanking you and all of the men and women serving in law enforcement for your service to our communities and to the people of the United States.

The intent of this hearing is to highlight the importance of the Bulletproof Vest Partnership grant program by giving law enforcement officers the chance to talk directly with the Committee about the value of body armor. I hope that by giving our witnesses this forum, more Members of the Committee will begin to understand that bulletproof vests make a real difference to our officers and their families. This week at Thursday's memorial, we will recognize and remember the 181 officers lost in the line of duty during the last year. Each death is a tragedy, but this is the largest yearly total since the extraordinary losses on 9/11 and in its aftermath. We need to do all we can for the men and women who risk their lives protecting us and public safety every day.

Two of the officers with us today have first-hand experience with the importance of armor vests, and I am grateful to them for their willingness to share their experiences with the Committee. I am also very pleased that Lieutenant Michael Macarilla from the Vermont State Police is here with us to share his insights into this program. Lieutenant Macarilla arrived in Washington by bicycle, having ridden 300 miles from New Jersey with other officers in the Police Unity Tour, to raise awareness about those who have lost their lives and to raise funds for the Law Enforcement Officers Memorial and Museum. We welcome our witnesses today.

I was proud to initiate the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Act with Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell. Between 1999 and 2007, \$234 million has gone to the States and has assisted in the purchase of an estimated 818,044 vests. It is great that the law we enacted is having a real impact on the safety and security of American law enforcement officers better enabling them to do their job. It means a great deal to me when officers come up to me and thank us for this program.

Despite the fact that the President's budget has repeatedly neglected to request authorized funding for this program, Congress has stepped up and recognized its importance and appropriated the funds needed to keep it strong. I hope that Congress will do so again this year. It may be easy for a government bureaucrat to look at Federal grant programs as just numbers and find ways to reduce Federal spending. But when it comes to the safety of law enforcement officers, I can think of no rational excuse not to fully meet Congress' determined level of support for the men and women who protect us all.

Bulletproof vests are expensive; no officer should be without one. They should be basic equipment made available to officers when we ask them to perform dangerous jobs. We should be past the time when this is viewed by departments as optional or when officers, who are not paid enormous sums, are asked to pay for their own protection. As we recognized when we passed the original law, these vests are a fundamental part of keeping officers safe in the line of duty and the Federal government must step up where State and local jurisdictions are unable to provide this essential equipment to their officers.

This administration has provided Iraqi police forces with a virtual blank check for the last several years. American taxpayers have seen hundreds of millions of dollars sent to Iraq and misspent, seen large sums of cash and weapons disappear or fall into the hands of partisan militias. If we can afford to pay for training and equipment for Iraqi police, we can afford bulletproof vests for the officers who protect Americans here at home.

State and local law enforcement officers assist Federal authorities in many areas, and this grant program should be viewed in the spirit of this cooperation. In an era when State and local law enforcement are shouldering more responsibilities on the front lines in the name of national security or in cooperation with Federal authorities in fighting interstate crime, the Federal government owes it to them to provide all the support it can. Much of our nation's strength lies in the rule of law, and Congress should support the men and women who serve to uphold the laws that protect our democracy and our safety.

The Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Act expires next year. Today, I am introducing a bill to reauthorize this program for another three years. I hope all Senators will join me in continuing this important program. Also this week, the Judiciary Committee will take up legislation to give the Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance at the Justice Department the authority to waive the Act's matching requirement for jurisdictions experiencing fiscal hardship. I hope all Senators will join in supporting this legislation. In an era of tighter budgets and a troubled economy, it makes sense to give the agency making these grants the authority to be flexible so it may ensure that no jurisdiction is excluded from such critical assistance simply because it cannot afford to meet the matching requirement.

I thank our witnesses for being here today and I look forward to their testimony.

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