

Testimony of

The Honorable Harry Reid

U.S. Senator

Nevada

July 24, 2008

STATEMENT OF SENATOR HARRY REID

Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on "Crimes Associated with Polygamy: The Need for a Coordinated State and Federal Response."

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for convening this hearing at my request.

The lawless conduct of polygamous communities in the United States deserves national attention and federal action. This hearing is an important milestone in the ongoing effort to curtail their pervasive criminal behavior. By coincidence, this hearing is being held on the 24th of July, a day that is celebrated by Mormons around the world as Pioneer Day. This holiday commemorates the arrival of the Mormon pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. As a practicing Mormon, one who adopted this beautiful faith with my wife when we were young, I am proud of my church for its accomplishments and the progress it has made since Pioneer Day was first celebrated. Indeed, we do honor to our pioneer ancestors by condemning those who have wrongfully cloaked themselves in the trappings of our religion to obscure their true criminal purposes.

For many years, these organizations received little attention from the rest of America. They isolated themselves in remote locations, and required their members to cut off contact with the outside world. In the West, we have a live and let live attitude. We try not to bother our neighbors and we expect the same from them. But polygamists have taken advantage of this attitude to form a sophisticated, wealthy, and vast criminal organization that has gone largely unchecked by government agencies. Early in my career I chaired the Nevada Gaming Commission, fighting to get organized crime out of the Las Vegas casinos. The mob bosses I was up against practiced extortion, embezzlement, fraud, public corruption, obstruction of justice, and witness tampering. I faced death threats and constantly worried for the safety of my family.

I am here to tell you that polygamist communities in the United States are a form of organized crime. I am not saying they are the same thing as the crime syndicates that used to run Las Vegas. But they engage in an ongoing pattern of serious crimes that we must not ignore. The most obvious crime being committed in these communities is child abuse - teen and pre-teen girls are forced to marry older men and bear their children. But the criminal activity that goes on in these places is far broader. Witnesses at this hearing will describe a web of criminal conduct that includes welfare fraud, tax evasion, massive corruption and strong-arm tactics to maintain the status quo. These crimes are systematic, sophisticated, and are frequently carried out across state lines. Today, polygamists have spread from Utah and Arizona into many other states including Nevada, Colorado, North Dakota, Missouri, New Mexico, and Texas. They have even expanded across international borders into Canada and Mexico. State authorities are on the front lines of this fight, and I have great respect for their work. Today you will hear from two hard-working state attorneys general about their efforts. But I have long believed that the federal government should play a larger role in this fight. The Department of Justice can help states enforce their own laws, and it can beef up enforcement of federal law. Greg Brower, the US Attorney for my home state of Nevada, will testify today. Greg and his colleague from Utah, Brett Tolman, will discuss the growing federal-state partnership to address these lawless communities.

I have encouraged this federal-state partnership for several years. I first wrote to then-Attorney General Gonzales in 2006 to suggest a federal task force on polygamy. In recent months I have worked with Deputy Attorney General Mark Filip, who has assigned a senior federal prosecutor to coordinate federal action in this area. And yesterday, I introduced a bill to strengthen this new federal-state partnership. The Victims of Polygamy Assistance Act of 2008 would establish a task force under the supervision of the Deputy Attorney General to bring together the various agencies necessary to deal with the broad pattern of criminal behavior perpetrated by polygamists. The bill also authorizes grants to assist victims. Because these organizations routinely threaten, harass, and tamper with victims planning on testifying against them, it is necessary to provide targeted funds so that law enforcement can protect them and, if necessary, shield their identity.

These lawless organizations must be stopped. I appreciate the efforts of the Committee to shed light on this growing problem, and I applaud our witnesses and all others who stand up against these powerful criminal forces.