

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator

Vermont

December 5, 2008

Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy,
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Hearing On "Community-Based Solutions
To Drug-Related Crime In Rural America"
St. Albans, Vermont
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Today the Senate Judiciary Committee returns to Vermont to hear from the people of St. Albans about this community's efforts to combat the persistent problems of drug-related crime in rural America. Once again, Vermont's civic-minded, all-hands-on-deck experience in dealing with drug-related crime in rural areas is helping to advance a dialogue about this problem that can be useful to rural communities across the nation.

Drug-related crime is not just a big-city issue. As we heard in Rutland earlier this year, drugs and related crime are a growing problem in rural communities in Vermont and across the country. The problems here, as in so many other small communities, are serious, but the people of St. Albans are not taking them lying down. They are fighting back and coming together as a community to find innovative, community-based solutions to these complex problems.

Of course, law enforcement has always been and continues to be central to combating the scourge of drugs, and there continues to be an urgent need for the federal government to adequately support state and local law enforcement. But more and more cities and towns like St. Albans are finding that the best solutions involve all segments of the community coming together with law enforcement to find meaningful, community-based solutions that address the underlying causes of these problems. Solving these problems as they arise is essential, but preventing them is even better, and less expensive.

It is important for the Senate Judiciary Committee to hold hearings not just in Washington, but also in the communities that face these problems day in and day out. With hearings like today's and the one we held earlier this year in Rutland, the Committee and the country can learn from those on the front lines about the strategies that work and about what the federal government can do to help.

Crime in St. Albans and Franklin County has increased significantly in recent years, and far too much of it has been drug-related. Reports of burglaries have gone up sharply, and many of these break-ins appear to be the result of drug users looking for money or drugs to feed their addiction. Incidents of armed robberies are also rising, and again there are links to drugs in too many of these cases. The kinds of drugs that are coming to Vermont are changing as well. More and more people are becoming addicted to prescription painkillers like Oxycontin, in addition to more traditional drugs like cocaine and heroin. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that more and more of our children than ever before are turning to these drugs at an early age.

The good news is that St. Albans, like other Vermont cities, is showing leadership in responding to these problems. Local law enforcement has joined with state and federal partners to target those who bring drugs to Vermont from big cities and urban areas. Recently the Drug Enforcement Administration assigned a full-time investigator to Vermont focus exclusively on the drug diversion problem, where prescription drugs from doctors make their way into the wrong people's hands. And just yesterday, state authorities held a state-wide conference for investigators focused on prescription drug and diversion cases.

Unfortunately, for the last eight years, in Vermont and elsewhere, state and local law enforcement agencies 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 during the Bush years, and time and time again, our state and local law enforcement officers like the Vermont State Police and the St. Albans Police Department have been unable to fill vacancies and get the equipment they need.

This trend is unacceptable, and I will work with the new Administration to reverse it. Eric Holder, whom President-Elect Obama intends to nominate to be our next Attorney General, has consistently emphasized the need for more support for state and local first responders, and I will join with him in the coming years to make good on that promise. That means restoring funding to the COPS and Byrne grant programs, which fund local law enforcement, and working to bring back the Crime-Free Rural States grant program.

As a former prosecutor I have always advocated vigorous enforcement and punishment of those who commit serious crimes. But I also know that punishment alone will not solve the problems of drugs and violence in our communities. Police chiefs from around Vermont and across the country have told me that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem, and I am sure that Chief Taylor will agree today.

Combating drug use and crime requires equal attention to enforcement, prevention, 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 drugs and crime altogether. And if young people do get involved with drugs, treatment in many cases can work better than punishment to help them to turn their lives around. Good prevention and treatment programs have been shown again and again to reduce crime, but regrettably, the Bush Administration has consistently sought to reduce funding for these important programs. It is time to move in a new direction.

I look forward today to hearing from community leaders like Dr. Holmes, Ms. Baker, and former Mayor DesLauriers, who are working collaboratively to attack this problem. There is no single solution to eliminating drugs and related crime, but they and others like them recognize that we all need to work together to turn our communities around.

I am glad to welcome so many Vermonters to the hearing today who care about and work on these issues. We have federal, state, and city officials, state and local law enforcement, educators, doctors, experts in prevention and treatment, concerned parents and citizens. In the great tradition of this state, Vermonters come together in times of hardship, and I am proud to see all of you here today, ready and willing to work together on this problem.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and to working with you all long after this hearing is over.

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