

Testimony of

The Honorable Peter Welch

December 5, 2008

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Office of Congressman Peter Welch

Testimony - Senate Judiciary Committee Field Hearing

St. Albans, Vermont - December 5, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Leahy, for your invitation to deliver remarks at today's hearing. And thank you for bringing the United States Senate Judiciary Committee here to Vermont. This hearing continues your long tradition of helping Vermont communities battle the scourge of crime. We all owe you an enormous debt of gratitude for your leadership and advocacy on issues of law enforcement and crime prevention. I have no doubt that our communities would not be as safe as they are here in Vermont if not for Senator Patrick Leahy's more than 30 year record of public service at both the local level and in the United States Senate.

We in Vermont are fortunate to live in a very safe state. Many of us don't lock our car doors, and some of us don't even lock the front doors of our homes. It is a great fortune that the citizens of St. Albans, and Vermonters generally, live without many of the concerns faced by millions of other Americans. However, that sense of security is beginning to erode.

I have had the opportunity to meet with local law enforcement officials all around the state of Vermont. What I hear at these meetings is that they are struggling to cope with an increase in illegal drug activity and a related increase in property crime. By raw numbers, St. Albans and the state of Vermont at large remain very safe places to live and raise a family. Relative to other places, our violent crime rate is comparatively low. Recent events prove, however, that rural states like Vermont are not immune from national trends. While Vermont's overall crime rate may seem low, the impact of these crimes on Vermonters' sense of safety and well-being is dramatic. In a small place like St. Albans, the psychological

impact of violent crime tends to be greater than it is in a more urban setting. Our towns are small enough here that we know our neighbors and we know our communities. The ripples of impact from criminal behavior spread quickly and deeply, tearing at the very fabric that holds our towns together.

The goal of today's hearing isn't to focus on the problem; instead it is to focus on solutions. How do we unite in communities like St. Albans to battle drug dealers and violent criminals? Law enforcement's number one tool is collaboration. Criminals pay no heed to the boundaries between towns, counties, or states. A seamless and unified approach between municipal law enforcement, state attorneys, the Vermont State Police, federal law enforcement, along with well-informed and motivated citizens is fundamental if we are going to succeed in stemming the rising tide of criminal activity here in Vermont.

Collaboration requires work and resources. Local law enforcement and the Vermont State Police rely on funding from federal sources to expand their law enforcement and drug prevention capabilities. Programs like the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program and the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program are critical to supporting Vermont's law enforcement and drug prevention efforts. As we look ahead to the FY'10

budgeting process, we must prioritize programs like these, which provide resources directly to local and state law enforcement.

Vermont's law enforcement personnel are working hard and working together to battle drugs and violent crime in our towns. They need a partner in the federal government. With critical programs like COPS and the Byrne Grants, our police will have the tools they need to maintain Vermont's peace and prosperity moving forward.

Vermont is a safe place, but we face challenges that if confronted directly, with strong collaboration and an appropriate level of federal support, we can meet. Thank you, Senator Leahy and the rest of the committee, for the opportunity to testify today.