

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
United States Senate
February 15, 2012

Today the Judiciary Committee will hear testimony about the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant program and other key programs providing Federal support for the men and women who serve in law enforcement. When I joined to introduce and pass the original bulletproof vest grant program in 1998, I wanted to do all we could to help protect the men and women in law enforcement who protect all of us. Just as we should have the best equipped armed forces in the world and the best equipped National Guard units, I believe that our state and local law enforcement officers need the best and most modern equipment to fulfill their mission and protect us in our communities across the country.

We originated this program to provide needed Federal assistance after several law enforcement officers from Vermont and New Hampshire lost their lives bringing a killing rampage by Carl Drega along our border to an end. Senator Campbell and I joined together to ensure that such basic, lifesaving equipment as the bulletproof vest would be available to state and local law enforcement officers.

The need for this program remains. Tragically, law enforcement deaths are on the rise, again. Last year, 177 Federal, state and law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty. No one should question the sacrifices that our law enforcement officers and their families make. While dangers, injuries and death are increasing, state and local law enforcement budgets are cut. Nearly 12,000 police officers and sheriff's deputies were laid off last year and the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services reports that approximately 30,000 law enforcement jobs remain unfilled. Our important Federal assistance to state and local law enforcement is a key investment in public safety. I was pleased to see that the administration's fiscal year 2013 request for the bulletproof vest program is consistent with recent appropriations. During National Police Week in 2008, Detective David Azur of Baltimore testified before this Committee. Detective Azur was shot at point blank range in the middle of the chest while apprehending a criminal. During his testimony, Detective Azur held up the armor plate from his vest that stopped the bullet that would have taken his life.

Since its enactment, the bulletproof vest grant program has contributed to the purchase of nearly 1 million ballistic vests to help protect our law enforcement officers. I wish that this lifesaving equipment was not needed, but I know better. I am often reminded of the importance of this program when I encounter officers in Vermont and around the country and they tap their protective vests.

Today I am delighted that the Committee will hear from two outstanding representatives of law enforcement. Chief Michael Schirling of Burlington, Vermont, is one of the new generation of law enforcement leaders. Chuck Canterbury served in law enforcement for 25 years and is someone I have come to know well as the President of the National Fraternal Order of Police. He is a strong voice for the men and women of law enforcement around the country. We will also hear suggestions from a representative of the GAO on how the Department of Justice might

further improve its distribution of funding.

Working to support our law enforcement officers has always been, and should continue to be, a bipartisan effort. This is something Senators can agree on regardless of politics. Longstanding Federal initiatives like the Violence Against Women Act, the Second Chance Act, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and other important programs have traditionally enjoyed strong bipartisan support. Senator Mikulski and Senator Shelby, as the bipartisan leaders of the key Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee, and Senators serving on both sides of the aisle on this Committee have been strong supporters of the bulletproof vest grant program.

The Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Act expires in September. I intend to introduce legislation in the coming weeks to reauthorize this program and I invite all Senators to join me in this effort. The bulletproof vest partnership grant program increases officer safety and effectiveness.

Our support for state and local law enforcement has been a bipartisan tradition. I hope that now as we proceed to reauthorize the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant program and other important law enforcement measures, Congress will join together with one voice to send a strong, clear message to our Nation's law enforcement officers that we will do all we can to protect them, just as they work so hard to protect all of us.

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