

U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley • Iowa

Ranking Member • Senate Judiciary Committee

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Prepared Statement of Ranking Member Grassley of Iowa
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on “Protecting Those Who Protect Us: The Bulletproof Vest
Partnership Grant Program”
Wednesday, February 15, 2012

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today’s hearing. Law enforcement officers across the country risk their lives every day to ensure that our neighborhoods and communities are safe. Unfortunately, the tragic reality is that law enforcement officers are often placed in situations confronting dangerous criminals that are intent on harming anyone who tries to stop them. Last year alone 164 law enforcement officers were lost in the line of duty, there were another 162 officers lost in 2010. We owe these men and women, and their families, a debt of gratitude.

This hearing is to discuss the reauthorization of the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program at the Justice Department. The program was created by Congress in 1998 and was designed to provide federal matching funds to law enforcement agencies across the country to purchase body armor.

By many measures, the program has been successful in getting body armor to state and local agencies that request the matching funds. The program has reimbursed law enforcement agencies with nearly \$247 million that has purchased nearly 1 million vests. This is important because these vests save lives, not just from bullets, but from other injuries, such as car accidents and assaults that occur in the line of duty.

Any program that helps save lives of law enforcement officers is important and should be reauthorized. However, that does not mean that we should simply write a blank check on the taxpayers dime without determining what is and what isn’t working in the program.

For example, one of the biggest concerns with purchasing body armor has been ensuring that the vests purchased are actually worn by the officers on the street. We can authorize as much funding as we want, buy as many vests as the taxpayers can afford, but if the vests aren’t on at the moment they are needed, those purchases don’t matter. For this very reason, the

Bureau of Justice Assistance has a mandatory wear policy on vests that are procured through the program.

This is an important provision and one that makes sense, but according to testimony we'll hear from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) this mandatory wear policy only applies to vests funded under the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program. It does not apply to body armor purchased through other programs like the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program. This is an inconsistency that needs to be addressed to ensure that officer safety is a priority when federal funds are used to purchase body armor.

In addition to reviewing the program to ensure vests are worn, we also need to take a look at how this program is being managed by the Justice Department. According to GAO's testimony, and a report released today in conjunction with the hearing, the Department's management of this program needs to be improved.

Specifically, multiple grant programs can be used to purchase body armor with federal funds, yet the programs have differing requirements on matching funds, wear policies, and standards for purchasing approved body armor. These inconsistencies should be fixed to ensure that minimum standards for both programs are uniform.

GAO also found that the Justice Department needs to address the financial bookkeeping of this program. GAO found that the Department has consistently failed to deobligate expired money in the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program for over a decade. Some of these funds trace back to Fiscal Year 2002 and have not been expended. All in all, GAO found that there is \$27 million in balances from grants awarded from FY2002-FY2009.

Further, GAO found that in 2009, there was an additional \$14 million in funds from the program that were officially deobligated and used to pay down a recession in the Department's budget. So, according to GAO, funds Congress specifically appropriated for the program to purchase body armor were never used to actually purchase vests. This is a serious matter and one that needs to be addressed immediately.

Unfortunately, according to GAO, the Department has said that they don't yet know what they'll do with the \$27 million available for de-obligation and they may not know what to do with it until September 2012. Any reauthorization of the program should ensure that the Department uses these funds to buy more vests, or pay down the national debt, not just sit on them for another decade.

Officer safety is paramount and we should do all we can to make sure officers on the street have body armor. However, we must also ensure that taxpayer dollars are monitored and

managed effectively by the Justice Department. We can and must do both. Reauthorizing this program affords us that opportunity.

I look forward to working on this reauthorization and to hearing the testimony of the witnesses. I thank all the witnesses for being here today. I also want to thank the GAO for expediting the release of their report so that we could discuss it here today.

Thank you.