

U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee Field Hearing
Chairman, Senator Patrick Leahy
Effective Community Efforts to Counter Drug-Related Crime in Rural America
Monday, March 22, 2010
Barre City, Vermont

Prepared Testimony – Colonel Thomas L’Esperance

I would like to start by thanking Senator Leahy and Senator Whitehouse for the opportunity to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee to address drug related crime in rural America, and specifically in the State of Vermont. As part of my responsibilities as the Director of the State Police I oversee the administration of the Vermont Drug Task Force, a multijurisdictional organization consisting of state, county and local officers whose responsibility it is to enforce our drug laws. My perspective is unique not only because I see the tremendous work being done every day by the Drug Task Force as Director, but also because I spent a significant portion of my career assigned there as an investigator, supervisor and commander. Throughout that time I can say without hesitation that the Drug Task Force and all its achievements would not exist today without the unwavering support of Senator Leahy and his staff over the years. For that support Senator I am deeply appreciative.

From a state wide law enforcement perspective the impact drug abuse and drug related crimes have had on our communities is substantial. We have seen increases in the number drug arrests and drug related crimes in both our rural towns and our larger cities. After looking at all the data however one thing is clear, if we do not focus on reducing the demand for drugs in Vermont we will not be successful in reducing associated violent crime. As a rural state, we face unique challenges in our efforts to curb drug crimes and the effects they have on our citizens. We do not have the luxury of the vast resources that exist in urban cities or suburban regions, so to be effective we must pool our resources and collaborate together in order solve these problems. Although it can be difficult to find solutions in a rural state such as Vermont, the fundamentals of illegal drug markets are the same everywhere. Where there is a demand, there will always be a supply. We cannot ignore this fact and we must work to both disrupt drug trade and reduce demand.

I can say unequivocally that the Vermont State Police and the Vermont Drug Task Force cannot solve this problem alone. Not only is it important to work with our partners in law enforcement but we must also continue to build strong relationships with other governmental and non-governmental organizations in our effort to drive down demand and reduce the influx of drugs into the state. I strongly believe in, and support a three tiered approach to reducing drug related crimes in Vermont. The first tier includes a continuous effort by law enforcement to investigate and dismantle drug trafficking organizations, especially those that profit from the drug trade. The second tier focuses on ensuring that drug users and drug addicts receive treatment by drug counselors and treatment centers. When we reduce the number of people with drug addictions, the demand for these drugs will decrease as well. The third and final tier includes educating all people on the realities of drug abuse. In particular we must dispel many myths associated with the use of prescription drugs among the youngest members of our society.

This multi-tiered approach is not a new concept. It was implemented in Vermont with great success almost a decade ago after the state was hit hard with the insurgence of heroin. Several years of wide spread focus using this strategy resulted in substantial drops in heroin arrests and for a period of time the demand for the drug subsided. Although we made great strides against heroin we know now that

the powerful pain medication Oxycodone, commonly found in the prescription drug OxyContin, quickly moved in to take its place on the street. The diversion of prescription narcotics is one of the greatest challenges we now face in Vermont. OxyContin has become as widespread and available as heroin or crack cocaine. With the increase in demand for narcotics such as OxyContin we are also seeing a spike in the number of heroin cases state wide. In the past 16 months there has been a 115% increase in the number of heroin cases conducted by the Drug Task Force. This can be attributed in part to the increase in OxyContin addictions in the state and the fact that comparatively the street value of a bag of heroin is generally less than half the value of one 80mg OxyContin pill.

Approximately four months after this committee held a field hearing in St. Albans, the Drug Task Force broke up one of the largest distribution rings of diverted OxyContin we have ever seen operating in Vermont. This group was responsible for bringing thousands of OxyContin pills into the state every week. Despite the challenges associated with prescription drug abuse, it continues to be my belief that if we maintain a strong focus on all highly addictive drugs using the combined strategy of enforcement, treatment and education we should be able to duplicate our successes from years ago.

Although we are seeing increases in specific categories such as prescription drugs and more recently a resurgence of heroin, we cannot forget the many achievements that law enforcement has made over the years. The work performed by the Drug Task Force has been instrumental in targeting mid to high level drug traffickers in the state. The Drug Task Force provides a specialized and valuable resource to state and local law enforcement agencies. It uses a model that shares information and manpower resources to address a specific problem spanning all jurisdictions. Time and time again the task force model proves to be one of the most successful management tools used by law enforcement today in Vermont and across the nation. This model has worked so well with drug enforcement in the state, it is now being applied to the organizational structure of our special investigation units.

Three years ago the Drug Task Force was instrumental in developing a drug enforcement operation in the Barre City known as Operation Granite Streets. This operation came at a time when drug crimes were at an all time high in the city and the region. The Drug Task Force, in cooperation with many local law enforcement agencies was able to identify and arrest three dozen people who were responsible for selling everything from crack cocaine to heroin. The operation provided immediate relief to the city and was so successful in reducing street level drug crimes that two other similar operations followed. Within two months of the very first field hearing of the Judiciary Committee in Rutland the Drug Task Force, in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies in Rutland County, conducted Operation Marble Valley. Less than one year later they were at it again in St. Albans to conduct Operation Rail City. These types of high impact enforcement operations are an important tool and will continue to be part of the overall strategy the Drug Task Force uses to assist local agencies with spikes in drug related crimes.

The mission of the State Police and the Drug Task Force is much broader in scope than that of local police departments in Vermont. Because the nature of our work encompasses the entire state we are not always involved in the day to day interactions that local police have with their communities. From our perspective however we continue to see strong local support after every large scale enforcement operation we conduct. Communities like Barre, which may at times feel overwhelmed by drug crimes come together after these enforcement operations to develop local solutions that help maintain the safety of their city. The Vermont State Police and the Drug Task Force will continue to work closely with our local, county and federal partners to ensure that we utilize our resources in a responsible and efficient manner.

Additionally, as part of our statewide drug enforcement strategy the State Police has also been participating in a national criminal enforcement effort through the Domestic Highway Enforcement project. Funding for this project has been made available through the Office of National Drug Control Policy. This program has enabled us to train and deploy troopers in areas where there may be increased criminal activity. It also provides for unprecedented information sharing both regionally and nationally which allows for a greater flow of information specific to individuals and organizations that traffic drugs into the state. This funding has allowed us to increase our traffic safety efforts through motor vehicle enforcement and has become a valuable resource to disrupting the flow of drugs into Vermont.

Lastly, our effort to curtail the wave of methamphetamine production that has swept through most of the nation appears to be working in Vermont. Although meth labs occasionally turn up, we were able to get ahead of this problem by working to enact tough pre-cursor laws that have been instrumental in slowing the spread of methamphetamine. We will continue to be vigilant in our efforts to control methamphetamine production by working closely with both the United States Attorney's Office and the Drug Enforcement Administration to ensure that meth labs do not take hold here.

As we move forward I will continue to rely on the tremendous support we have received, and continue to receive from the federal government. Without the funding secured by Senator Leahy over the years our ability to operate the Drug Task Force at the level of success it enjoys today would not be possible. Subsequently our ability to positively impact local communities and rural sections of the state would be severely diminished. With your help, we will continue to focus on our mission of disrupting all drug trades throughout the state and ensuring that our communities are free of drug related violent crimes. I would again like to thank Senator Leahy and the entire committee for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.