

Testimony of
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Senate Committee on the Judiciary
"Rising Crime in the United States: Examining the Federal Role in Helping Communities Prevent and Respond to Violent Crime"

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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Ted Kamatchus and I currently serve as the Sheriff of Marshall County, Iowa and President of the National Sheriffs' Association. I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to express my concerns and what I know to be the concerns of sheriffs across the country with the recent increase of violent crimes coupled with severe reductions in federal assistance to state and local law enforcement agencies.

The essential message that I bring to you today is that the federal government needs to play a large role in crime-fighting. Together we need a coordinated national attack on crime, recognizing that there is no single "silver bullet" solution. Political rhetoric must not prevail over action.

As you may be aware, sheriffs play a unique role in our criminal justice system. In addition to providing traditional policing within their respective counties, sheriffs also facilitate local jails and are responsible for protecting and providing security for the judicial system. Over 99% of the sheriffs are elected and oftentimes serve as the chief law enforcement officer of their counties. Consequently, we have a keen understanding of the needs of our criminal justice system as well as of the local communities we serve. In the early 1990's Congress joined in a partnership with local law enforcement to provide assistance in federal funds for hiring additional officers to put offenders behind bars and fight the war on drugs. Unfortunately, in recent years, the federal government has strayed from its commitment to fight crime.

The majority of violent crimes we have recently been experiencing have been related to drugs and an increase in gang activity. Sheriffs have not been able to hire the number of officers they need to address these issues, and in many jurisdictions, current levels of staffing only allow officers to respond from one 911 call to another.

For more than 30 years, Byrne grants have funded state and local drug task forces, community crime prevention programs, substance abuse treatment programs, prosecution initiatives, and many other local crime control and prevention programs. We perceive this program as the underpinning of federal aid for local law enforcement to address violent crimes. Continued

reduction in Byrne funding will undoubtedly obliterate the successes that we have all helped to achieve.

In most states, Byrne funded drug task forces are the cornerstone of drug enforcement efforts. These task forces represent the ideal in law enforcement; pooling limited resources, sharing intelligence, strategically targeting a specific problem, and eliminating duplication of efforts. Moreover, these task forces allow federal, state and local law enforcement and prosecutors to work together and share intelligence to stem large-scale organized crime. However, most states have had to scale back on the number of such task forces.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of COPS programs, particularly in that funding for these programs are distributed directly to local law enforcement agencies - those that can best assess and allocate funds where they have the most impact. COPS programs assure the quality of policing services through better training and the highest technology equipment.

We have heard time and time again that "homeland security begins with hometown security." Yet, vital programs such as the Byrne and COPS programs that provide the necessary resources to ensure "hometown security" have both been cut drastically and the hiring initiative for COPS has been zeroed out in recent years. It is of no surprise to those in the law enforcement community that since law enforcement programs have been depleted the crime rate has been rising. We urge this Congress to restore funds for these important public safety programs - Byrne at the authorized level of \$1.1 billion and COPS at \$1.15 billion. We would also like to express our thanks to Senators Biden and Feinstein for taking a leadership role in their efforts to restore funding for these two essential law enforcement programs.

In addition to highlighting the importance of the Byrne and COPS programs, I would also like to urge the Senate to take action on some of the measures that we believe will assist local law enforcement address violent crimes. The National Sheriffs' Association has endorsed the Gang Abatement and Prevention Act (S. 456) aimed at increasing and enhancing law enforcement resources committed to investigation and prosecution of violent gangs, the Second Chance Act (S. 1060) which would begin to address the nation's escalating recidivism rates, the Methamphetamine Production Prevention Act (S. 1276) which would facilitate the use of electronic methamphetamine precursor logbook systems in order to help states crack down on domestic meth production and the PRECAUTION Act which would create a national commission to identify promising areas of crime prevention and intervention strategies to provide guidance in a direct and accessible format to state and local law enforcement to ensure that the criminal justice community is investing its limited resources in the most cost-effective way possible.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to note that over twenty sheriffs from border states were in Washington last month to seek federal assistance to address violent crimes along the border including human and drug trafficking, homicide, robbery, and proliferation of gangs and drug cartels. I cannot stress enough the urgency of this matter. I implore this Congress to heed the words of those sheriffs that have first hand experience of the violence along the border as this Congress revisits the issue of immigration reform. These sheriffs have stepped up to the plate to shoulder the burden of securing the border, which is primarily a federal responsibility, and we

simply ask that the federal government provide appropriate funding to these sheriffs until the federal government can adequately address the problem.

Conclusion

I want to thank you for the opportunity to come before you and express my concerns. I hope I have conveyed to you the dire situation that sheriffs are faced with across the country and how critical Byrne and COPS programs are to us. The strain caused by limited funds for law enforcement programs in the face of increasing violence and drug abuse in our communities should be a major inducement for government and law enforcement alike to share the responsibility for keeping our communities safe. I ask for your full consideration on my comments today. I know that through your commitment and efforts together we can provide safer communities for the American people.