

Rutland, Vt - Rep. Peter Welch testified today at the Senate Judiciary Committee's field hearing on drug-related crime led by Chairman Patrick Leahy.

"Rutland is not alone in its struggle with drugs and violence. The problem extends to all corners of Vermont... 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 peace and prosperity for our future," said Welch in his testimony. "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."

Welch's full testimony follows:

Congressman Peter Welch

Testimony - Senate Judiciary Committee Field Hearing

Rutland, Vermont - March 24, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Leahy, for the invitation to testify at today's hearing. And thank you for bringing the United States Senate Judiciary Committee here to Vermont. Today 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.

Thank you also, Senator Specter, for being here with us today. As you are likely aware, we in Vermont are fortunate to live in a very safe state. Many Vermonters, after selling their home or moving from an apartment, must remember where they put the keys, since it has been so long

since they locked their back door. It is a great fortune that the citizens of Rutland, and Vermonters generally, live without the concerns faced by millions of other Americans. However, I fear that is beginning to change.

On January 19th I had the opportunity to meet with Chief Anthony Bossi of the Rutland Police Department. Chief Bossi will be testifying later today. What I heard from Chief Bossi is that the City of Rutland is struggling to cope with an increase in illegal drug activity and a related increase in violent crime. Only weeks after my visit with the Chief, there was a drug-related murder here in the city that took place only blocks away from the middle school. One thing that Chief Bossi impressed upon me is that Rutland is not alone in its struggle with drugs and violence. The problem extends to all corners of Vermont. I also recently met with Chief Tim Bombadier of the Barre City Police Department, Chief Anthony Facos of the Montpelier Police Department, and Captain Tom Nelson of the Vermont Drug Task Force. They all repeat a similar refrain - drug dealing, violent crime, and property crime are on the rise in many of Vermont's communities. It's a problem we must address.

By raw numbers, Rutland and the state of Vermont remain a very safe place 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. For 2006, the last year that detailed crime statistics are available, Vermont saw a 12.2% jump in violent crime. While the numbers that comprise this percentage may seem low, the impact of these crimes on Vermonters' sense of safety and well-being is dramatic. In a small place like Rutland, the second-largest city in Vermont with a population under 20,000 people, 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 towns. The rippling impact of criminal behavior spread quickly and deeply, tearing at the very fabric that holds our communities together.

The impact is not just on our sense of well-being. One of Vermont's key attractions to those looking to relocate here is the sense that our state is safer than wherever they are moving from. After the tragedies of September 11, countless people relocated from New York City to rural communities in New England because they wanted a secure place to raise their families. The same is true of many people looking to start or re-locate a business. Our safe, secure communities are a central part of the appeal for those looking to move. An anecdote that highlights this point: in the days after the recent murder here in Rutland, my office took a call from someone living in New York State who had long been planning to retire here in Rutland. He indicated having real second thoughts based upon the recent news. As Vermont communities like Rutland, Barre, St. Albans and Springfield work hard to revitalize by attracting new businesses and residents, maintaining excellent public safety is critical.

After describing the impacts that increases in crime have on Vermont's communities, it is appropriate to talk about solutions. How do we unite as a state and nation to battle the 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, states attorneys, the Vermont State Police, and federal law enforcement is fundamental if we are going to succeed in stemming the rising tide of criminal activity here in Vermont.

Chief Bombadier from the city of Barre described to me how he works closely with the towns of Montpelier, Berlin, and Northfield to combat crime in their region. His department also works in tandem with the VT Drug Task Force and federal law enforcement to track criminal activity. With help from my office, the Barre Police Department secured a Byrne Grant also known as a Justice Assistance Grant for the 2008 Fiscal Year, a grant program Senator Leahy has long championed. One of their top priorities in spending these funds is to collaborate with the town of Montpelier to hire a joint officer to focus on illegal drug activity. Barre is not alone. Local law enforcement and the Vermont State Police rely on funding from the federal sources to expand their law enforcement and drug prevention capabilities.

Despite the proven track record of the Byrne grant program in reducing crime in Vermont and across the country, funding for this program has been decreasing in recent years. As a result of budget restrictions, the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program suffered severe cuts in the FY 2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act. Funding for the Byrne-JAG program was cut by two-thirds, from \$520 million in Fiscal Year 2007 to \$170.4 million in Fiscal Year 2008. The House Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill originally provided \$600 million for the Byrne-JAG program - a level that I support. For FY2009, President Bush would cut funding by \$174 million below what is needed to maintain services at the current level. In Vermont, this will result in a loss of \$435,000, essentially defunding as many as 13 police officer positions. We in Congress must reverse this cut.

COPS grants, another program championed by our senior Senator, are also a critical tool for Vermont Law Enforcement, and unfortunately the COPS program has seen similar funding cuts since a high in funding reached in the late nineties. After receiving more than \$1 billion each year in the late 1990s, funding for the C.O.P.S. program has been cut in half and now stands at \$587.2 million for FY2008. The President's FY2009 budget proposal eliminates C.O.P.S. funding. This funding has enabled local and state police agencies to hire additional officers and has been instrumental in reducing violent crime.

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 peace and prosperity for our future.

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.