

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on “The Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Program:
Supporting Law Enforcement Officers When it Matters Most”
May 14, 2014**

This week is National Police Week. Thousands of law enforcement officers have gathered in our Nation’s Capital to honor the sacrifices of our men and women in law enforcement, particularly those who have lost their lives in the line of duty. Today we have an opportunity to discuss a program that helps to protect those who protect us. For over 15 years, the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program has been saving lives by helping to provide over one million vests to over 13,000 local law enforcement agencies. It is a critical program that I know every single law enforcement officer in the room today supports, and I greatly appreciate their presence for this important hearing.

A week ago I stood on the Senate floor and sought unanimous consent to reauthorize this program. At the time I reminded my fellow Senators that if you claim to support law enforcement, you need to stand with them when it matters most. I assured them that law enforcement cares deeply about reauthorizing this program. Today – seeing all of the law enforcement officers in our Committee room – that message could not be clearer.

The law enforcement community has spoken with a single voice on this issue. They understand the unfortunate reality that life-saving vests can be extremely expensive – especially for smaller jurisdictions – and that they can wear out too soon. They also understand that Congress has played an invaluable role in supporting this program, and many officers are alive today because of it.

However, we have learned that a few Republican Senators believe that the Federal government has no role to play in assisting local law enforcement; that somehow it is a mere luxury. I could not disagree more. We in Congress have long supported local law enforcement because we have a duty to keep our communities safe.

Congress provides support to local law enforcement agencies to target violent gangs and high-volume drug traffickers; to access vital intelligence across state borders; to reduce backlogged sexual assault kit tests; and to provide benefits to the families of officers killed in the line of duty. These important programs have historically received overwhelming bipartisan support – even from some who now claim an ideological objection to supporting local law enforcement.

The Bulletproof Vest Partnership program has always enjoyed strong bipartisan support. Republican Senator Ben Nighthorse-Campbell and I worked together to create the program nearly three decades ago. It was so successful that, in the past, it was reauthorized with a voice vote. It was the right thing to do – it saved lives – and that was enough for both Democrats and Republicans. Today, every single Democrat in the Senate supports this program. I am glad to note that many of my friends across the aisle do as well. Senator Grassley has worked closely with me to strengthen and reauthorize this program, and I thank him for his efforts. But some

Republicans are blocking this effort, and it is inexcusable. They have walked away from a tangible and effective way to protect the lives of our law enforcement officers.

The newfound claim that the Constitution somehow does not permit Congress to assist law enforcement through a voluntary grant program is patently absurd. The Supreme Court has never construed Congress' spending power in such a way. No reasonable interpretation of Article I, Section 8 could conclude as much.

I hope that those who oppose reauthorization will listen to the testimony today. If they do they will learn that this vests program is hardly a luxury – it is necessary to save lives, and is worth our support. They will hear from Yousry Zakhary, Chief of the Woodway, Texas Police Department and President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). The IACP helps maintain a list of more than 3,100 officers who have survived death or serious injury by wearing protective body armor. Chief Zakhary knows first-hand how this program saves lives.

Officer Ann Carrizales of the Stafford, Texas, Police Department will also testify. Officer Carrizales was shot twice during a routine traffic stop last year and was saved by her protective vest. She heroically pursued the suspects for 20 miles and ultimately helped a neighboring police jurisdiction apprehend and arrest the shooter. I am so thankful she is here to tell her story.

There are many heroes in the room today, and I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses, including Officer Ann Carrizales, whose vest stopped a gunman's bullet just last fall. Two additional heroes I want to recognize are Sergeant Michael Manley and Corporal Steven Rinehart of the Delaware Capitol Police. A year ago, a gunman entered the New Castle County Courthouse and opened fire, tragically killing two women. Officers Manley and Rinehart immediately engaged with the gunmen, and they were both struck in the chest. Their protective vests – purchased through this program – saved both of their lives.

Last night, thousands of officers gathered for a candlelight memorial at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial. The Memorial contains the names of over 20,000 officers who have lost their lives in the line of duty. Last night the names of 286 fallen officers were added to its walls. Thankfully, Officer Carrizales, Sergeant Manley, and Corporal Rinehart's names were not among them.

You will hear many speeches this week paying tribute to law enforcement, but law enforcement deserves more than speeches; they deserve action. All Senate Democrats are ready to reauthorize the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program today, as well as the Blue Alert Act that this Committee has also reported. I hope that, after hearing from you today, and seeing all of you this week, all Senators will join these efforts. It is time for Congress to act.

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