

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on “The Need for More Timeliness and Transparency: Oversight of the Public
Safety Officers’ Benefits (PSOB) Program”
April 26, 2016**

Our nation’s law enforcement officers, firefighters, and other first responders face dangers every day to ensure the safety and security of our communities. They pursue armed gunmen, race into burning buildings, and resuscitate those on the brink of death. Congress has a responsibility to support and protect these brave men and women. This is why I have championed the Bulletproof Vest Partnership program for over 15 years, which has provided state and local law enforcement with nearly 1.2 million life-saving protective vests. And this is why, in 1976, Congress created the Public Safety Officers Benefit (PSOB) Program to support those first responders who made the ultimate sacrifice, as well as those disabled in the line of duty.

I have since worked to close remaining gaps and improve the PSOB program. In 2003, I worked with a bipartisan group of senators to pass the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act, which recognized that law enforcement officers who suffer fatal heart attacks or strokes in the line of duty also deserve benefits. And I authored the Dale Long Emergency Medical Service Providers Protection Act, which extended PSOB benefits in 2012 to nonprofit Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers, covering an estimated 1,200 EMS personnel in Vermont alone.

Over the last 40 years, the PSOB program has largely been a success. The program reviews nearly 900 claims each year, and has provided thousands of families some measure of relief and support during the most challenging of times. But the program has also been plagued by unnecessary and unacceptable delays in processing benefits. In 2004, the Attorney General instructed the PSOB program to process claims within 90 days of receiving all necessary information. Yet, 10 years later in July 2015, the Office of the Inspector General for the Department of Justice found that 27 percent of claims were pending for more than one year. The reasons for the delays are many, and certainly not all fault rests with the PSOB office. The PSOB office continues to improve its adjudication processes, and has been responsive to the recommendations contained in the Inspector General report. But it is clear that we must do better.

Today’s hearing will help us determine why the PSOB program is failing to process claims quickly and efficiently. If the PSOB program is short staffed, then we should ensure that it has the necessary resources. If the PSOB program is unable to obtain documentation necessary to adjudicate claims, then we should determine what enforcement tools are available to the program and whether it is fully utilizing those tools. If there are other explanations for the delays, then we should carefully examine these hurdles and what can be done to overcome them. I stand ready to work with any senator to further improve the PSOB Program.

In two weeks, just steps from the Capitol, families of fallen officers will take part in the 35th National Peace Officers’ Memorial Service. The names of officers who were killed in 2015 will be added to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, which now contains the names of over 20,000 fallen officers. I know all of us agree that each one of these families deserves a

working and responsive PSOB program. It is a promise we first made 40 years ago, and it is one I intend to keep.

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