

Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs

Hearing on "Metal Theft: Public Hazard, Law Enforcement Challenge"

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Good afternoon Chair Klobuchar, Ranking Member Hatch, and members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored and pleased to be here this afternoon, to testify on the need for federal legislation to fight the continued growing problem of metal theft in Minnesota, and all across the country.

My name is Mona Dohman and I am the Chief of Police for the City of Maple Grove, in Maple Grove, MN. We are a growing third ring suburb of Minneapolis, MN, with a current population of approximately 62,000 residents. I am also the President of the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association – a state association with a mission to enhance the professionalism of policing throughout our state. I am here to speak on behalf of metal theft crimes in our community and across our state. In particular my testimony is from a local law enforcement perspective.

In each of my roles I have seen firsthand and read about the negative and devastating impact that metal theft has had in our community and the infrastructure around the country. I'd like to share just a few examples of the results of metal thefts in our communities:

In Minnesota, we are fortunate that we have tighter restrictions and regulations on scrap metal dealers. However, metal thieves do not have to travel very far to cross our state borders in order to sell stolen metals, and in order to get quick cash to support the habits they have, whether it be drug addiction or perhaps gambling addictions. The Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association supported tougher laws and restrictions on scrap metal dealers and were instrumental in helping pass laws that provided for the same. We support similar federal laws as well.

In 2008 the Grand Rapids, MN Police Department investigated a case in which a 46 year old truck driver was stealing copper from the Xcel Energy Center in Maple Grove. The suspect in the case stole copper and then sold it to a metal recycler in Grand Rapids, MN, over a period of three years.

The suspect's full-time job was to deliver copper wire to various sites in MN. The suspect was able to steal the copper wiring in smaller amounts and obtain quick cash at a metal recycling center in Grand Rapids, MN. He had developed a relationship with the owner of the business. It is suspected that the man was supporting a gambling

addiction and over the course of a three-year period he stole over \$300,000 in copper wiring. Because the thefts occurred in smaller amounts and over a long period of time, the crime went unnoticed and thus unreported.

In June of 2008 detectives at the Maple Grove Police Department investigated a report of over \$10,000 worth of stolen copper wiring and various metal pieces from a hotel construction site. In further investigating our case, we were able to identify a suspect who was described by acquaintances as being "hard core, big into copper theft and big into meth use." We were informed that he never worked alone, and would pay others to make his copper deposits for him. He had essentially developed an organized crime ring on a smaller level in the state. We know that he committed his crimes across our state, from as far north as Two Harbors, MN in the far northeastern corner of our state, all the way south to Farmington, MN in the southern part of our state.

In September 2008, a vacant north Minneapolis four-plex exploded after thieves took copper pipes out of the home, which lead to a natural gas leak. The threat to public safety is of great concern in cases like this.

We know that in April 2008, five tornado warning sirens in the Jackson, Mississippi area did not warn residents of an approaching tornado because copper thieves had stripped the sirens of copper wiring. In March 2008, nearly 4000 residents in Polk County, Florida were left without power after copper wire was stripped from an active transformer at an electric company. And we know from FBI reports that farmers in Pinal County, Arizona were the victims of copper thefts from their irrigation systems, resulting in the loss of crops and high dollar costs to replace the equipment. The infrastructure loss in that county due to copper thefts was estimated at \$10 million.

We know that there is typically a common thread in most cases of scrap metal theft. We believe that drug addiction, gambling addictions, or the like are common themes. Trading in scrap metals for quick cash at metal recycling centers is the reason that this is a lucrative business for some.

Investigation and prosecution can be very time consuming, due to the lack of evidence and very few leads, thus absorbing sometimes scarce resources of officer time and money from the jurisdictions responsible for investigating the case. We know from our case in Maple Grove and many cases around the country, that the thieves do not work alone. Identifying all parties involved can be very difficult. As recently as April 2008, we know that highly organized theft rings specializing in copper theft from houses and warehouses were operating in Minneapolis, MN. It is reported that these rings or gangs hit several houses per day, yielding more than \$20,000 in profits per month. Their target was foreclosed homes. As recent as 2007, the St. Paul Police Department reported that 60% of all burglaries were for scrap metal. Burglaries, overall, are down in St. Paul, but it is reported that almost 40% of their burglaries in 2008 were for scrap metal.

I have shared some of the larger dollar loss cases from around the country. However, I believe it is important to mention that many times these cases can be difficult to investigate and ultimately prosecute because the thefts can occur in small amounts; thus, victims either do not realize their victimization or because of such small amounts, they may not feel that it is necessary to file a police report. It is difficult to prosecute a case when there is "no victim."

If we pass laws on the federal level to help, then we are recognizing the negative impact that these crimes have in our communities and the infrastructures within. These crimes are frequently viewed as low priority when we think about how they measure up to crimes such as murder, robbery and rape, for example. I can tell you though, in over 27 years in law enforcement, I have seen that these sorts of crimes all overlap. Certain crime can be and is a gateway to farther reaching and more severe crime, having devastating impacts within our communities.

So, what does this all mean?

We know that once the thieves steal the metal, it does them no good if they cannot sell it. The Klobuchar-Hatch bill puts record keeping requirements on scrap yards and metal dealers and I believe it is an effective step in deterring this crime.

I believe that if drug users, gang members, and/or the middle man must give certain basic information, like a driver's license or a government ID to a scrap metal dealer – it will deter these criminals from this avenue of access to quick cash. Trading in scrap metal for quick cash is the reason these criminals commit this crime. If we take away their access to quick cash – by regulating the process in which they "cash in on their crime," and by regulating the amount of cash they can get on the spot – their crime becomes less attractive and certainly less lucrative.

I know, and we know that the record keeping and retention requirements in the Klobuchar-Hatch bill will not end all metal theft across the country, but it is a positive, proactive step to helping law enforcement as we strive to reduce victimization, across the board, in our communities.

In conclusion, we in Minnesota have been fortunate with tough state laws and regulations to address metal theft, and we have witnessed firsthand how they have assisted law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting metal theft crimes. However, to effectively stem metal theft across the country, Congress must act to ensure that these crimes do not find their way into other states. Minimum federal requirements, as identified in the proposed bill, S. 418, must be implemented to assist in our law enforcement efforts.

Thank you very much.