

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
**“An Oversight Hearing on Reduced Federal Funding For
Law Enforcement and the Rise in Violent Crime”**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and give testimony on the negative impact the reduction of federal grant funds has had on local law enforcement. My name is Brian O’Keefe and I am a Deputy Chief with the Milwaukee Police Department.

I want to be clear that I am not here today to engage in a partisan discussion. The safety of the citizens of our country is a non-partisan issue that must receive the full attention and financial support of our all elected representatives.

During these anxious times, we find ourselves struggling to provide public safety services to our communities with diminishing financial resources. Law enforcement agencies are being asked to do more with less and to respond to an increasing number of calls that are ever more violent. Any reduction in grant funding for state and local law enforcement agencies will jeopardize the gains that were made in crime reduction in the past decade.

In the past, Milwaukee has been fortunate to receive a significant amount of Byrne Grant funding, both directly and in a shared capacity. This has greatly enhanced our ability to develop strategies to address drugs and violent crime, as well as, target serious and repeat offenders. I cannot emphasize enough the many benefits that were realized. We enjoyed reductions in crime, as we became more effective in identifying, arresting, and prosecuting individuals and organized street gangs that engaged in violent criminal activity. This was accomplished by our involvement in the Milwaukee Metropolitan Drug Enforcement Group, HIDTA, and other task forces. Most recently, grant funding helped to finance specialized community prosecutors and drug prosecutors who work closely with both law enforcement and community residents to rid neighborhoods of crime and disorder. Grant funding has also permitted us to upgrade our technology, improving our criminal record keeping and our ability to detect and track offenders. The reductions in crime realized as a direct result of these pro-active programs, funded with the assistance of federal dollars, is now at great risk.

Back in the early 1990's, the Milwaukee Police Department was handling over 150 homicides a year. In the past decade, with the assistance of federal grants, we were able to implement deterrent-based policing strategies, increase the number of officers on the street, and reduce the number of homicides to an 18-year-low of 88 in 2004. Unfortunately, in 2005 we jumped up to 122 homicides; our robberies and assaults also had double-digit increases. This has put a strain on our ability to pro-actively police our city with deterrent-based strategies, as we become driven by calls for service.

It is no coincidence that in the early 90's, as is now the case in 2006, we also have the fewest number of officers on the street. The Milwaukee Police Department is over 225 officers down from our authorized strength, as the tremendous increases in technology, equipment, and fuel costs have forced us to reduce the number of officers on the street to stay within our budget. This is not just a problem for us in Milwaukee.

In the past, I have heard people say that local law enforcement issues should not be a federal responsibility. I couldn't disagree more.

Since 9/11, local law enforcement agencies have become the frontline in keeping our nation safe. The current threat from both domestic and foreign terrorists has put additional responsibilities on all law enforcement agencies, which did not exist prior to 9/11. We have used a substantial amount of local funds to upgrade our ability to detect, respond to and mitigate any terrorism event. We have been tasked with providing extra patrols at transportation and power facilities, ports, and other critical infrastructure sites. We have conducted training for all of our officers on counter-surveillance and terrorism detection. We have also created a unit dedicated to homeland security issues, staffed by state and local officers.

The federal government has provided billions of dollars in homeland security funds, but these grants have been primarily geared towards critical infrastructure, equipment and technology upgrades. I want to state unequivocally that these homeland security funds are welcomed and very much needed, but no piece of equipment or technology upgrade has ever placed handcuffs on a violent criminal, located a missing child or stopped to interview a suspicious person at a critical site.

Additionally, state and local law enforcement agencies are supplying federal law enforcement with our personnel resources on many task forces. The Milwaukee Police Department has officers and detectives on the Joint Terrorism Task Force, the ATF Task Force, the US Marshal's Task Force, The DEA Task Force and the HIDTA Task Force.

These partnerships are critical to policing our community and nation, but none of our officers are fully funded, putting the financial responsibility back on our agency. The reassignment of our personnel resources to the federal task forces, coupled with the overall reduction in officers, is a tremendous burden on our agency as there are even fewer officers available to answer an increasing number of calls for service.

As these examples show, the financial strain currently being experienced by local law enforcement agencies is definitely a federal issue.

The restoration or increase of federal funding levels for local law enforcement will provide us with the resources and equipment to operate more effectively. We would also like to have more flexibility in the expenditure of grant funds, as was available with the LLEBG funds. The current limitations on the use of JAG grant funds for the purchase of squads, or the hiring of personnel, does not account for local needs, and limits our ability to efficiently police our city. My request for flexibility does not mean there should not be accountability and a constant review to ensure an efficient delivery of services. All law enforcement agencies in our area have combined resources to reduce costs and maximize our ability to police our area, but the narrower guidelines on expenditures, as set forth by Washington for all agencies nationwide, fails to adequately account for local conditions. My request for the restoration of funds to previous levels and increased flexibility will assist in providing personnel, training and equipment resources that would otherwise be unavailable in our operating budget. It will also allow us to aggressively attack crime and disorder, and try to turn back the increases in the crime rate that are having such a severe impact on my city.

At a time when law enforcement agencies have to be extra vigilant in protecting our communities from foreign and domestic terrorism, as well as carry on our traditional law enforcement role, the reduction of federal grant funds will not only have an adverse impact on local communities, but our nation as a whole.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.