

Testimony for Senate Budget Committee

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On behalf of my entire staff, I want to thank you, Senator Conrad, for taking the time to come to Fargo today to hear my colleagues and I speak about the negative impact the proposed reductions or reallocations of funding for several law enforcement assistance programs will have on our respective organizations. I think it is crucial for our elected officials in Washington to understand how incredibly important these programs are to communities like Fargo, and what the implications may be if they are all but eliminated.

Late last month I released the 2007 year-end crime data for the city of Fargo. The news was all good. Fargo experienced no increase in crime in 2007 in comparison to the previous year. In fact, we saw reductions in a number of crime categories such as sexual assault, vehicle theft, arson, and offenses related to methamphetamine. The men and women of the Fargo Police Department put forth tremendous effort to accomplish this feat, and they intend on making 2008 an even safer year for those who live and work in our community.

These accomplishments happened because the citizens of Fargo, through our elected officials, are committed to keeping Fargo safe and enjoyable. This includes making sure the financial resources necessary to meet the public safety challenges of our growing community are available. But not unlike many other communities across the country, maybe even most, the city of Fargo needs the support of the various federal law enforcement assistance programs to carry out our responsibility of maintaining the public's safety.

In the mid to late 1990's, the City of Fargo received significant financial support through the federal government's COPS - Universal Hiring Program, which allowed us to add nearly twenty police officers to the police department. Without this funding, it would have been virtually impossible for us to have added those officers to our understaffed police force. With the proposed elimination of the funding for this program, it will become increasingly difficult for a growing community like Fargo to increase the size of its police force and provide officers with the training and equipment needed to confront the ever increasing public safety challenges.

As I said last year, what has become increasingly frustrating for me as the city's police chief is that the one thing I need the federal government's help with more than anything else, is funding for personnel. It's the funding that has allowed us to put more cops on the streets of Fargo and allowed us to keep crime in check that has evaporated more quickly than any other. In other words, the one thing I need the most help with is the one thing the federal government will no longer provide.

Other federally funded law enforcement assistance programs like the Byrne/JAG Funds, and State Homeland Security Grants, are equally important to our mission. Without the funding assistance these programs provide, many of my department's needs relative to interoperable radio communications and other equipment needs would have been all but impossible to obtain.

For example, the City of Fargo was recently able to significantly upgrade its radio communications system and become totally interoperable with other area police, fire, and EMS providers. The multi-million dollar assistance we received from the federal law enforcement assistance programs now allows us to communicate much more effectively in the event of an emergency. Had local government been expected to finance this much needed improvement without federal assistance, it's doubtful the improvements would have been made or been completed in the timely manner required.

As the policymakers in Washington, D.C. continue to make "Homeland Security" a nationwide priority, and one which starts at the local level, it is imperative that they recognize how incredibly important their support is to those of us on the domestic "front-line". Police chiefs and other local law enforcement officials throughout this country recognize that it is our responsibility first, not the federal government's, to keep our communities safe. We gladly accept this challenge. But we also recognize that local government simply does not have the financial capacity to absorb the sweeping cuts presently being proposed to many of the federal programs which have been so vital to our ability to carry out this responsibility. And it is in this regard that I respectfully ask those considering the proposed reductions or reallocations of funding for these important federal assistance programs to give them due consideration and fund them adequately.