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on

“Challenges Facing Law Enforcement in the 21st Century”

before the

Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security and Investigations

on

Committee on the Judiciary

United States House of Representatives

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— BUILDING ON A PROUD TRADITION —



Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Jackson-Lee and the distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security and Investigations. My name is Chuck Canterbury, the National President of the Fraternal Order of Police, representing more than 330,000 members in every region of the country. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you this morning, during National Police Week, to talk about the challenges faced by rank-and-file law enforcement here in the 21st century.

But before I do, I want to thank this Subcommittee for its recent work on bipartisan bills, some of which I understand may be considered on the House floor this week, show our nation's officers that Members of Congress do recognize the challenges and dangers faced by our men and women in law enforcement. Please accept our gratitude.

Right now, my members are very concerned about their safety. According to a recent FBI report analyzing 50 cases in which an officer was shot and killed, 28% of the assailants were motivated by a hatred for police or for social/political reasons. Others were simply out to "get justice" and told their friends and family members or used social media to communicate their intent to

murder a police officer. The FOP has argued for some years that hateful vitriol, amplified by social media, is leading to violence directed at law enforcement officers and this report bears that out.

Our views of law enforcement as a society have changed in the past few years and the respect we once had in our communities and among our elected leaderships has greatly diminished. The lack of support from our local, State and Federal leaders, who are often too quick to denounce a police action or the decision of an individual officer, have contributed significantly to this erosion of trust and support. Today, an incident that becomes violent and involves the use of force, even in cases where suspects were not to have violent, criminal histories, the first narrative in the media is that the police “acted stupidly” or used “excessive force” or engaged in deliberate “police brutality.” Elected officials usually echo this false narrative instead of challenging it.

Mr. Chairman, every American deserves due process of law and no one should be condemned without the facts, not an individual and certainly not an entire profession.

Another persistent false narrative recycled in the news and social media is that police have become too “militarized.”

Mr. Chairman, law enforcement is modernizing, not militarizing—this is an important distinction. The previous Administration, ignoring the input of the law enforcement community, imposed broad new restrictions on Federal equipment programs throughout the Federal government and creating burdensome new requirements on basic equipment like anti-ballistic shields and helmets. It was a huge and harmful overreaction to negative media coverage and the fake “militarization” narrative. The 1033 program, administered by the U.S. Department of Defense, was singled out for specific criticism, but the executive order that imposed the new prohibitions and restrictions impacted equipment programs throughout the Federal government, including the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security as well as other surplus equipment or leveraged buying programs. It had, and continues to have, a negative impact on preparedness at the local and State level.

We are working with the new Administration to restore the integrity of these programs, but Congressional action is needed to prevent future Administration from arbitrarily changing programs which are authorized by Congress and we urge the Subcommittee to consider H.R. 426, the “Protecting Lives Using Surplus (PLUS) Equipment Act.”

The need to restore programs providing assistance to State and local law enforcement is not limited to equipment, but hiring programs like that administered by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). We have less police on our streets and neighborhoods than we did a decade ago. It is no surprise to our profession that crime, particularly violent crime, is on the rise. There are less men and women policing our streets and keeping the peace. Recruitment and retention is a major challenge for law enforcement because it is a difficult job and because public safety salaries and benefits do not always compete with the private sector. We cannot afford to lose existing Federal resources without risking further erosion in the policing profession.

For this reason, I urge the members of this Subcommittee to support full funding for the COPS hiring program and for the vital assistance that the Edward Byrne Memorial and Justice Assistance Grants (Byrne-JAG) provides. Byrne-JAG grants support a wide range of law enforcement operations, including multi-level task forces taking on our most serious public safety threats like gangs and trafficking in firearms, narcotics and people.

Similarly, the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program administered by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) provide local, State and Federal law enforcement agencies with the ability to coordinate to execute a national strategy. Our nation is currently facing an epidemic of opioid-related drug overdoses—drugs now kill more Americans than guns and car crashes combined. State and local law enforcement agencies are on the front lines of the fight to combat drug trafficking and reduce illegal drug use—without the resources of the ONDCP and its HIDTA and Drug Free Community programs, we will be less likely to succeed.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I have spoken about the challenges facing our profession as a whole. I want to close with talking about the challenges facing the individual police officer. Law enforcement officers are expected to be mentally healthy and resilient. But the job and the situations we must respond to do takes a toll on the mental health of the individual officer. Officers responding to a shooting, or who lived through something like the attacks in Dallas or Baton Rouge, or who responded to an event like Sandy Hook or Pulse nightclub may need help in dealing with their experiences.

We have done a great deal to better protect our officers from physical harm and now we need to do better about keeping them mentally healthy.

The Federal government provides mental health and wellness services to its employees and members of the active and retired military. The FOP helped craft legislation, H.R. 2228, that would direct the Attorney General to work with the Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs to collect information about the mental health and wellness programs they administer. It is our hope that this information, once gathered, would allow local and State law enforcement agencies to develop best practices and model guidelines to help provide similar services to their officers. Perhaps we can also identify ways to leverage existing services to help these officers. The knowledge and expertise is there, we just need to figure out how best to apply it at the local and State level. This week is National Police Week as well as Mental Health Awareness Month, so it seems to be an ideal time for Congress to consider this bill.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear today and I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the Subcommittee may have.