Transcript from Senator Harkin's Participation in Federal Funding Hearing on Law Enforcement Support

April 16, 2008

Senator Harkin: I can't help but comment on this statement of yours here about, '. . . after seven months in this OMB job, I can testify that many of the ideas we're asked to fund reflect a sky is the limit mindset. But this money doesn't belong to us – it's the taxpayers' money.'We hear that a lot, it's true, it is the taxpayer's money. But you know what I hear from the taxpayers in your home county and all over Iowa? They want better roads, they want safer bridges, they need their schools repaired, they need clean water, they need waste water. We've got over $2 billion in backlog for rural water and wastewater. We put some of that out a few years ago and it went out right away. And these are systems that the engineering work is done, the plans are there. All they need is the money to put it in. And I can tell you that our small towns and communities all over our state of Iowa need this. Right now a lot of them are being asked to pay enormous amounts of money for water and wastewater and they're not meeting some of the environmental regulations that they need to meet also. So we've got a big unmet need out there.

So it seems to me from your standpoint it seems to me and this administration – you represent the administration – that government spending for reconstruction is fine in Iraq but somehow it's onerous here in America. And then you go to great lengths in your statement to say there is a time and a place for that: to do that in a regular and not in an emergency supplemental. Well it seems to me that the time and the place for it is when the need is here and the need is here right now for the things I just mentioned.

I read in your testimony earlier and you mentioned about Manchester and you said that: "Expanding government doesn't create one job in my hometown of Manchester, Iowa." Well quite frankly I was just looking lately just on school construction alone. Delaware County got $295,199 for school reconstruction. That put jobs in those communities, made the schools safer for our kids. Road projects. The Iowa DOT wants to do a bridge and culvert replacement near Edgewood. Well that's jobs that could go to people this summer in the state of Iowa, in your home county to put people to work and get the jobs done. I suppose it could wait another year but everything can be put off I guess. But then it costs more and more money to get it back up the longer you wait.

So just put me down as someone who says yes I recognize this is the taxpayers money too. But I also recognize that some of these things can't be done by an individual taxpayer, they can't be done by a family, they can't even be done by the community, it has to be the community at large – the United States of America – and that's our job as appropriators. I think the need is there for now with us facing some kind of a – we don't know if it's a recession or what it is we know it's a downturn – and we know that we have unmet reconstruction needs here in our own country. So I would hope that we would look upon the need here just as greatly as we look upon the need in Iraq. I assume that's just a philosophical difference we have.

But I do want to know about one thing and Senator Mikulski is certainly our lead on this in terms of funding for the Byrne Grant program. You know this as well as anybody Jim. And you know what it's done in Iowa, what it's done for our drug task force. The cuts that occurred in 2008 will eliminate 15 of 21 successful drug task forces unless we restore it. The cuts to the Byrne Grant program that the president asked for will have a devastating effect on our Iowa law enforcement. I just say Iowa because I represent Iowa but it's true of the nation at large.

And I'd like to know you as OMB director what are you doing within the framework of the White House to get the Byrne funding back up to where it should be. And we can't wait until next year Jim, we got to

do it now on this bill, on this bill. And I'd like to have your thoughts on whether or not you would be willing to accept the increase, the bump up back, I think it's about $459 million to get it up to $660 on the Byrne Grant program just to get it to last year's level and do it on this supplemental.

Director Nussle: First to my friend from Iowa, thank you. With regard to Byrne – and that may be as good a place to jump off as any.

First on moving forward on the Budget that we're requesting – I was just stating this before. What we've tried to do is take a lot of successful, in many instances often well meaning grant programs many of them across the Justice Department and consolidate them into four so that our law enforcement agencies back home can take better advantage of them. Byrne would be included in that. So it's not that it's cut, it's been adjusted.

The cut – the interesting part about this that I was surprised about too – is that actually Congress decided last year to cut funding almost $350 million was cut in 2008 in the appropriation from the 2007 level. So I think we know there are limited resources, I think both Congress and the president recognize that. And what we're trying to do is say: how can we best spend those resources. How can we get them out as efficiently as possible to the law enforcement who are on the front lines as the Senator knows as well as I do doing that work. And that's the reason we made the request in this year's budget the way we did. So I believe there is a regular appropriations process to deal with this and deal with it effectively but we shouldn't make up for an omnibus bill that cut the funding just now five months later by increasing it again and suggesting that that is somehow now an emergency.

Senator Harkin: I'm sorry to hear you say that because I think it is an emergency plus the fact that that you put those four together and then you cut the funding so everything takes a cut. Those four you put together, if you add up all the funding for those it's more than what you put in for that combined program.

Director Nussle: That's correct

Senator Harkin: That's correct

Director Nussle: But also because in part because we recognize that Congress cut $350 million from the Byrne Grant Program just this last year alone.

Senator Harkin: That was only after the President vetoed the bill. We didn't cut it before did we? No. We only cut it after the president vetoed the bill and insisted on huge domestic spending cuts. So that's what we were confronted with.

Director Nussle: What he insisted on was that the budget conform to a top line recognizing we didn't want the deficit to go up or for that matter for taxes to go up and so obviously tradeoffs within that budget had to be made. And that's the reason that the president made that suggestion but congress made the determination of where that priority . . .

Senator Harkin: And I hate to go on but under the Byrne Grant Program, the amount that we have missed from last October to right now we've had a little bit of a cushion people have been able to make it up. If we have to go back on to this next October before it's funded again, we're going to lose a lot of these people, the task forces will be decimated, they'll lose a lot of the things they've built up. So we could take a little gap but we can't take a year's gap and that's what you're asking us to do. And that's why I think it's so necessary to put the Byrne money in this supplemental before we lose all our law enforcement people who are in place right now in the Byrne program.

Director Nussle: Again we believe that's a discussion that needs to happen within the regular appropriations process and we shouldn't hold up the troop funding in order to have that debate.

Senator Harkin: We won't hold up the troop funding, we'll just add it.

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