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Sen. Webb, police discuss drug problem

By Jenay Tate, Editor & Publisher

Drug abuse and drug trafficking were the central issues Monday when U.S. Sen. Jim Webb met privately with law enforcement officers from throughout Southwest Virginia.

After the 45-minute session at Norton Municipal Building, Webb said he heard law enforcement express concern about the growing drug problem, their ability to enforce drug laws and the need for federal funding to aid their efforts.

Law enforcement also spoke to the need for better ways to educate young people against drug abuse, Webb said, adding that enforcement and prevention are both part of the criminal justice reform bill he has been working on.

Looking at the interaction among the various agencies that tackle the drug problem is essential, the senator said.

In 1980, he said, there were 40,000 people jailed on drug charges. Today, that number has grown to 500,000.

"We have to find a better way to deal with the problem," Webb said. "It's a sickness and we've got to treat the sickness."

Webb said he had been working toward getting all southwestern Virginia counties included in the Appalachia High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program. HIDTA facilitates cooperation between drug control organizations and helps federal, state and local law enforcement organizations invest in infrastructure and joint initiatives to confront drug traffickers.

Neighboring Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee are involved in HIDTA but far southwestern Virginia has not been, he said, hindering joint efforts. "There's got to be a balance of enforcement," Webb said, adding that Virginia has suffered from the spill-over of drug problems from Tennessee and Kentucky.

Webb said Wise, Lee and Scott counties are now part of the HIDTA and he will continue to work toward designation of other counties in the region.

DRUG TRAFFICKING ROUTE

After the meeting, Wise County Sheriff Ronnie Oakes said news of the county's inclusion in HIDTA came in August but he has not yet been advised how much money will be directed this way.

Whatever it will be is needed, Oakes said, and will be put to good use, on such things as manpower and equipment.

“Drugs are just traveling through here all the time,” he said. “These funds will help us as we’re trying to determine who, when and how these drugs are getting into the county.”

Oakes said law enforcement already knows that local people are traveling to Florida to pain clinics, stocking up on pain killers and then heading back to Wise County to sell the pills at extraordinary profit.

“This is an open route for north-to-south drug trafficking,” Oakes said. “It’s greed, that’s what it is. And then it fuels the addiction problem. It’s just sad really.”

Oakes said he thought at one time that “education was going to be the answer...but we just can’t get through to them.”

The expense of tackling drug abuse and drug trafficking is more than localities can bear, Oakes said, noting that it can cost from \$800 to \$1,500 just to clean up one methamphetamine lab.

“The county and city can’t afford to keep paying this out,” he said.

Coeburn Police Chief Willie Stout was gratified to hear Web acknowledge that southwestern Virginia had been excluded from the HIDTA program and appreciated the senator’s effort to rectify that.

Stout and Norton Sheriff Carlos Noaks said afterward that their departments, like others, have suffered from budget cuts that impede their ability to tackle crime.

“We’ve all taken hits to our budgets,” Stout said.

Noaks observed that most people don’t understand just how expensive it is to tackle drug abuse and trafficking. “It’s so much more involved than people know,” he said.

He also stressed the importance of prevention. “The best possible situation is getting to them early where they don’t become addicts,” Noaks said.

Oakes said Webb has been good to help and great to work with. “Federal funding will help us curb the flow of drugs through here,” he said.

It was the first time Oakes could recall a meeting with Webb among all the law enforcement in the region.

WEBB’S FEDERAL PUSH

In February, Webb urged the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to add 13 Southwest Virginia counties to its Appalachia HIDTA program.

“The expansion of Appalachia HIDTA into these Virginia communities would extend the reach and efficiency of HIDTA, allowing it to effectively combat and eradicate, rather than merely geographically relocate, these systemic drug trafficking and production networks,” Webb wrote to R. Gil Kerlikowske, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

U.S. interstates (I-64, I-77 and I-81) and major byways (such as U.S. routes 23, 58, 11, 19, 421 and 41) traverse Southwest Virginia, making the region an ideal distribution and trafficking juncture for illicit drugs, Webb wrote earlier this year. “There has been a documented upsurge in drug trafficking organizations moving into the area. Galax is one of three Virginia communities which the Department of Justice has recognized as having a verified presence of Mexican drug cartels.

“In addition, these localities are seeing a marked upsurge in the production and interstate trafficking of methamphetamines and the diversion of pharmaceuticals such as OxyContin, Vicodin, and Xanax.”

With the August inclusion of Wise, Lee and Scott, Webb’s request would expand the Appalachia HIDTA to include the counties of Dickenson, Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Grayson, Russell, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington and Wythe.

Local task forces, such as the Southwest Virginia Regional Task Force, “have made significant impacts upon street level arrests, but lack adequate resources to identify and target the drug supply chains,” Webb wrote to Director Kerlikowske. “Federal collaboration and coordination with local enforcement would have a significant impact on the violence and drug related deaths that plague this region, and would dramatically improve the quality of life for the people of Southwest Virginia.”