

STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR BENJAMIN L. CARDIN (D-MD)
“Honoring America’s Finest”
May 15, 2008

MR. CARDIN: Mr. President, this week, 358 new names were inscribed on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, representing officers from across the country over the course of many years. We often take for granted the thousands of brave officers who dedicate their lives to protecting our streets and our communities every day across Maryland and across America. But this week, during National Police Week, we all should take a moment to thank these brave men and women – America’s Finest – who risk their lives on our behalf. We especially must honor the fallen law enforcement officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice so that the rest of us could enjoy our families and go about our daily business with a common sense of peace and security.

Nationally, 187 law enforcement officers gave their lives in the line of duty during 2007. More than one third succumbed to gunfire. On average, they were nearly 11-year veterans of their respective departments. The average age was just 39 years young. Seven of these brave officers were women. Most importantly, these were sons and daughters, husbands and wives, sisters, brothers, and true role models for those who knew them well or saw them on the street proudly wearing their uniform or badge. So our thoughts, during this special commemoration, also are with their families and the communities they touched by their presence.

Four of Maryland’s Finest gave their lives for our safety in 2007 and one more recently on New Year’s Day, January 1, 2008. I would like to take a moment to tell you about these brave law enforcement officers.

Troy Lamont Chesley, Sr., was a detective with the Baltimore City Police Department. At age 34, he was a 13-year veteran. On January 9, 2007, shortly after Detective Chesley got off duty at a Public Housing Unit, a suspect attempted to rob him. Despite being shot and mortally wounded, Detective Chesley was able to take police action and return fire. The robber was arrested later in the day and charged in connection with Detective Chesley's murder. A widower himself, Detective Chesley is survived by his three daughters, two sons, parents, and brother.

On April 25, 2007, Police Officer Luke Hoffman had been with the Montgomery County Police Department just one year when, he was struck by a car while involved in a foot pursuit of a suspected drunk driver. The driver had fled on foot after a slow-speed pursuit in the Aspen Hill area early that morning. Officer Hoffman was struck after chasing the suspect across Old Georgia Avenue in an area with very low lighting conditions. Another patrol car struck Officer Hoffman when his patrol car went down an embankment and struck a tree. The officer in the patrol car was injured. Officer Hoffman was flown to a local hospital where he later died.

Corporal Scott Wheeler of the Howard County Police Department was struck by a speeding vehicle he was attempting to flag down on Route 32. He had stepped into the roadway in an attempt to stop the car for speeding while working an enforcement detail. He was flown to Maryland Shock Trauma Center where he died on June 18, 2007, two days after the accident. Corporal Wheeler had served with the Howard County Police Department for six and a half years. He was posthumously promoted to the rank of corporal. He is survived by his wife, parents, and brother.

Another brave Marylander who lost his life far too early was 25-year-old Police Officer Christopher Nicholson of the Smithsburg Police Department. Officer Nicholson was shot and killed while responding to assist members of the Washington County Sheriff's Office at a call involving reports that a man had just murdered his girlfriend during a domestic disturbance. As he waited in his patrol car a short distance away from the home for additional units to arrive, the suspect drove towards officer Nicholson's patrol car and opened fire as he pulled even with the officer's door. A rifle slug struck him in the chest, penetrating his vest. The suspect fled into a nearby cemetery, where he engaged members of the Special Response Team in a shootout. The man was wounded and taken into custody. Officer Nicholson was flown to a local hospital where he succumbed to his wounds. Officer Nicholson had previously served with the Maryland Division of Correction but spent only one and a half years with the Smithsburg Police Department before his death. He is survived by his mother, father, and girlfriend.

Finally, another auto accident claimed the life of Corporal Courtney G. Brooks of the Maryland Transportation Authority Police Department. He was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver on I-95 in Baltimore City at approximately 11:30 pm on New Year's Eve 2007. A 13-year veteran of the Maryland Transportation Authority Police Department, Corporal Brooks was setting out cones at the interchange of I-95 and I-395 to keep commercial vehicles out of downtown Baltimore during New Year's celebrations when he was hit. The driver fled in his vehicle but was apprehended early the next morning. Corporal Brooks was transported to Maryland Shock Trauma Center where he succumbed to his injuries shortly after midnight on New Year's Day, January 1, 2008. Lost at the age of 40, Corporal Brooks is survived by three children and a fiancé.

I mentioned earlier that gunfire accounted for more than a third of the law enforcement deaths nationwide. This was the single-biggest cause of death. Perhaps after hearing about Police Officer Hoffman, Corporal Wheeler and Corporal Brooks it is no surprise that automobile accidents fall second on that list, claiming the lives of over 25 percent of law enforcement officers who died nationwide last year.

During this commemoration, let me also mention offer thanks to The Officer Down Memorial Page, a non-profit organization dedicated to honoring America's fallen law enforcement heroes every day of the year by telling the stories and preserving the memories of each of these officers at www.odmp.org. I also offer my tribute and respect to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, which generates increased public support for law enforcement as a profession, promotes law enforcement safety, and leads our nation in remembering the fallen 365 days a year, but especially during National Police Week.

I am humbled by the sacrifice these law enforcement officers have given for their fellow Marylanders. I would hope that they represent the last of our nation's finest law officers who would sacrifice themselves for the greater good of safety and security.

Unfortunately, we know that is not likely. That's why, as a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee I am working with my colleagues to improve the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Program to make it easier for states to qualify for grants under this program. While not a guarantee, bulletproof vests do save lives and allow more men and women in law enforcement to return home to their families at the end of their shift.

We held a hearing in the Judiciary Committee earlier this week, during which we heard from Detective David Azur, an ATF agent from Baltimore, Maryland. He testified about how, in 2000 while working as part of the Regional Auto Theft Task Force, he was shot in the line of duty, and survived only because of his bullet proof vest. He was subsequently awarded the Medal of Valor for his actions that day.

I also recognize that strong partnerships between first responders, like police officers, and the cities and states they serve are vital to public safety. I firmly believe that all of our nation's first responders deserve the right to be treated with respect. But far too many first responders across the country do not have basic workplace protections.

As we debate the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act, I pledge to work to ensure all first responders receive the respect they deserve with the same protections enjoyed by so many other workers across the country. I have co-sponsored this important bill. In honor of the 187 law enforcement officers who gave their lives last year and the more than 18,000 who have done likewise, I urge my the Senate to pass this important legislation.

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