29 January 2013

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman,

I am writing on behalf of the Fraternal Order of Police, the oldest and largest law enforcement organization in the United States, to strongly recommend that several measures, all absolutely critical elements of addressing gun violence, be included in any legislation moving forward as a result of your deliberations.

These measures are:
- Expansion of background checks on firearm purchasers;
- Reinvigoration of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to ensure that it has the tools and resources necessary to its mission;
- Improved law enforcement access to mental health records in the context of firearms acquisition; and
- Funding to put more State and local law enforcement officers on the street.

With the horrible tragedy in Newtown, the increased number of mass shootings in our country, and, candidly, the gun violence which happens on some scale every day in big and small municipalities across the country, many plans are being offered to curb the violence and better protect our citizens. We hope that our three recommendations will be included. We both know action needs to be taken—and taken now.

We believe the most logical starting point to address gun violence is the expansion of the background check system. Incomplete or absent background checks create a gaping hole in the wall between firearms and criminals. Loopholes in the background check system give criminals unprecedented opportunity to access firearms. This problem must be remedied quickly. An expanded and improved background check system will provide the first level of defense against criminals arming themselves.

We encourage you to consider expanding the resources available to ATF to combat firearms trafficking. ATF provides invaluable assistance to State and local law enforcement officers and agencies engaged in the ongoing battle against the violent criminal misuse of firearms. It is also necessary to provide ATF with the resources and manpower necessary to enforce the laws already on the books. As things stand now, ATF has been scraping by with a dwindling number
of agents and other resources while ATF’s mission has expanded. Frankly, this is unacceptable. Specifically, the confirmation of B. Todd Jones must occur as quickly as possible. As Acting Director at ATF, Mr. Jones has provided the agency the leadership and vision which has been lacking in recent years. Mr. Jones has the requisite experience pursuing tough firearms and weapons cases and has demonstrated the ability to reset ATF after recent tumultuous investigations. For too long we have denied ATF the proper resources and our nation and our children have paid the price. We also believe specific penalties must be incorporated into the Gun Control Act of 1968 for illegal firearms trafficking. This addition would greatly assist ATF agents during the investigation and prosecution process.

In addition, local and State law enforcement agencies, who have been hit so hard by our nation’s ongoing financial woes, need the resources to put more officers on our streets and in our neighborhoods. Federal programs assisting State and local law enforcement have been cut to the bone and beyond, with more cuts on the way. There are jurisdictions out there telling civilians bluntly that they will have to defend themselves because their agencies do not have the manpower to respond. Proactive and community-oriented policing, key strategies of our nation’s anti-crime strategy, are rapidly becoming impossible because our local and State law enforcement agencies lack the resources and manpower.

Along with comprehensive background checks, better access to mental health records is critical to keeping guns out of the wrong hands. Without access to these records, law enforcement, at all levels of government, is handicapped which gives the criminal element the advantage. And, most obviously, State and local law enforcement need the resources and manpower to better target and reduce gun crimes. These are all common sense, easy fixes which will have far-reaching impact and better equip our law enforcement officers to fight gun violence and protect our citizens.

Mr. Chairman, for many years we have stood side by side on tough issues and I look forward to continuing to do so as we confront these difficulties head on. On behalf of the more than 330,000 member of the Fraternal Order of Police, I ask for your serious consideration of our suggestions and thank you for your constant willingness to work with us on these issues. If I can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me or Executive Director Jim Pasco in my Washington office.

Sincerely,

Chuck Canterbury
National President