



TESTIMONY OF

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SENATE REPUBLICAN POLICY COMMITTEE

EXAMINING CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS AND TRENDS IN PENNSYLVANIA

Thank you Chairman Laughlin and members of the Senate Republican Policy Committee. We appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about crime and public safety, and to be joined by so many impressive partners and colleagues within the criminal justice system throughout Pennsylvania.

The testimony we are submitting identifies some of the major issues we see throughout the Commonwealth. During the hearing, we hope to expand on some of these issues, discuss them in greater detail, and to answer any of your questions.

At the outset, it is clear that so many individuals are increasingly concerned about crime and public safety. Indeed, government's core function is to keep people safe, and without public safety, there is little else. That does not mean that everyone necessarily sees eye to eye on every facet of the system, that solutions are easy to identify and implement, or there are singular solutions to our myriad of challenges with regard to public safety.

But what we would like to do during this hearing is to identify what we and our colleagues are seeing throughout Pennsylvania and to be able to provide some context and detail about these challenges. When we meet with and speak to our prosecutor colleagues across Pennsylvania about what we all face, many common themes arise. In no particular order, we would like to identify them for you:

- Recruitment and Retention: Put simply, attracting and perhaps more important retaining good prosecutors is harder and harder. This is a nationwide problem. Attend a National District Attorney's Association Conference, and one of the most common discussions you will hear is about this problem in rural, urban and suburban counties throughout the country. The same problem exists here. To be sure, the workforce challenges are not unique to prosecutors. Our police and public defenders are experiencing it; our juvenile justice, substance use disorder, and behavioral health systems are struggling with the same issues. Being a prosecutor is not easy, takes an emotional toll, is not particularly well-paying (which is especially challenging with the student loans that so many young law student graduates have) and requires one to be in the office most days. But the Commonwealth benefits when practitioners in the

courtroom are experienced. Unfortunately, we are seeing less and less of this.

- Online Crimes: Just about everyone is online, which means that the opportunity for online crimes has and continues to increase. And the sophistication of those who commit these crimes continues to increase. Online crimes include child exploitation, cyberbullying, and financial fraud. Vulnerable individuals, such as kids and the elderly, are often targets of these crimes. Addressing these crimes typically requires more and more sophistication and resources by law enforcement, in large part because the criminal activities of the perpetrators have become more widespread and more sophisticated.
- Investigatory Resources: One of the most common frustrations we hear from our colleagues is about the lack of resources related to investigations involving narcotics, as well as the challenges related to electronic device extractions. With regard to the latter, remember that investigative information — from drug trafficking to child exploitation — is so often contained in cell phones. Being able to access information contained in cell phones is absolutely critical. The same analysis applies to information stored on computers as well. With regard to investigations, when our labs take longer to turn around their results for investigations (including drug trafficking and firearms cases), justice can be delayed or even denied.
- Behavioral Health: A significant number of inmates in county and state prisons suffer from behavioral health and substance abuse issues, and often from both. The behavioral health needs of those involved in the criminal justice system need to be better addressed. And, indeed, the behavioral health needs of those with challenges need to be addressed before they become involved in the criminal justice system. This is one of the most critical challenges we face, and it is one of the most difficult as well. Our correctional facilities should not be the largest behavioral health treatment facilities, and significant and hard work must be done to change where we are headed.

- Narcotics: Trafficking of serious and deadly drugs continues. No one needs to remind any of you about the fentanyl crisis we face. No one needs to remind any of you about how crafty dangerous dealers and manufacturers are. We appreciate that the Department of Health recently temporarily scheduled xylazine as a Schedule III drug. This is not the last time that the Department will need to identify and schedule new and equally dangerous substances. We must continue to treat those with substance use disorder. We must continue to invest in treatment courts and alternatives to incarceration for those who cannot break the addiction cycle. And simultaneously we must stop those traffickers who pollute our communities with deadly drugs.
- Firearms Crimes: You are all likely aware of the proliferation of firearms crimes across Pennsylvania. These crimes are no longer relegated to our larger or even mid-size counties. Even smaller more rural counties are experiencing gun violence and gun traffickers. The increase of these cases puts even more pressure on our crime labs, whose results in these cases are central in achieving justice. It is also worth noting that many of us have seen an increase in juveniles possessing and even using illegal guns.
- Juvenile detention beds: There are simply not enough available beds in our juvenile justice facilities. There are many reasons for this crisis, which makes achieving solutions more difficult. It is certainly a workforce issue. In so many areas, while there is enough physical space, there are not enough individuals working in the facilities, meaning fewer individuals can be placed here. These individuals are so often high-risk individuals and/or have been adjudicated of significant crimes that placement in these out-of-home facilities is necessary. We also know that in the Western part of the Commonwealth, as well in Northeastern Pennsylvania, there is a shortage of facilities. Solutions here will require significant work and collaboration among all stakeholders, both state and local.
- Thefts: Catalytic converter thefts are up. They are often sold to scrap metal dealers. This crime can absolutely disrupt an individual and families. Due to the rapid increase in thefts, there is a shortage of parts available for

necessary repairs, with some people losing use of their vehicles for a significant amount of time. This affects the ability to drive to work, medical appointments, or to drive one's kids to school.

Thank you for your invitation to appear before you, and we hope that our identification of these issues is helpful. During the hearing, we look forward to discussing many of these issues in more detail.