

**Testimony for the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee**  
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Good morning, Chairman Laughlin and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address you on a number of challenges facing law enforcement related to organized retail theft, law enforcement workforce limitations, and mental and behavioral health issues in our judicial system.

First, let me address **organized retail theft**.

Increased criminal activity is causing a strain on law enforcement resources, taking away from time we could be spending on public safety issues, including violent crime. Some agencies simply don't have the tools they need to detect complex, organized crimes that use sophisticated tactics to evade authorities. Frankly, the scale of these enterprises are likely underreported since departments in many major cities are forced to focus instead on violent crimes plaguing their neighborhoods. Even when a department devotes time to this issue, as we indicated, resources are finite. Not only are tactics, such as stakeouts, labor intensive and time consuming, often they become multi-jurisdictional and multi-state, creating challenges across a number of agencies.

The Pennsylvania State Police investigate or assist with local investigations. Assisting another agency includes being on the lookout for a vehicle or subjects. When encountered, suspected actors typically flee the scene, and our members become involved in a pursuit. Our criminal investigation units will get involved to assist patrol, depending on the severity and complexity of the initial investigation.

Special investigation units within PSP do become involved when notified by loss prevention or corporate security from the retailer. A request may come after an excessive dollar amount of stolen items has been reached or other aggravating circumstances that warrant the unit's involvement. These units can also be requested by our department's 16 Troops.

It's also important to note that organized retail theft rings do not stop at retail theft. The public needs to be aware that sophisticated operations also engage in identity theft, receiving stolen property and other fraud-related crimes.

To address this growing issue, statutory definitions on organized retail theft should be established, along with setting a minimum number for actors and dollars lost to qualify as a racketeering crime (commonly referred to as Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations, or RICO). The PSTA recommends increasing the sentences for fleeing and eluding during the commission of these crimes. And it should go without saying, but these crimes must be prosecuted. Simply put, if criminals can get away with a crime, they're going to keep doing it.

Now, let me discuss **law enforcement workforce limitations**.

It's important to state that the public image of law enforcement is perhaps more important than any other profession when it comes to the recruitment of new officers. Right now, that image is eroding, due largely to media outlets focusing on singular, controversial events or issues, rather than looking at the overall quality and good work being done by police officers every day.

The hiring process presents unique challenges because it's a multi-stage, time-consuming process that's essential to ensure only quality candidates are recruited. We must conduct appropriate background investigations, followed by lengthy academy training and field training. Law enforcement is also increasing responsibilities for officers, while pay remains stagnant and departments continually push to cut health care benefits and diminish working conditions.

To help with recruitment, the answers are simple: Starting salaries, benefits and working conditions have to be MORE competitive and alluring in comparison to other professions. This job has also become more stressful since the pandemic. Consideration must be given for increased time off to help officers reach a better work/life balance.

Finally, I'll address **mental and behavioral health issues in the judicial system**.

On the job, we typically deal with people who are having their worst day, but occasionally their best. When it's their best, it typically means a celebration has

gotten out of hand. But when encountering a complete stranger, the luxury of knowing which day that is isn't always easy to know or interpret. By the sheer nature of our profession and by our definition as first responders, it's difficult to immediately ascertain if we're dealing with a mental health or behavioral issue, the threat level or need.

Fortunately, our department continually works to provide the very latest training to assist in these sometimes intense situations, which require split-second decisions. Our department utilizes programs and training that help officers when they encounter people with mental and/or behavioral health issues. Also, Pennsylvania's Mental Health Procedures Act of July 9, 1976, provides guidelines and definitions used just for these purposes.

Over the past several decades, local governments have adopted specialized approaches to respond to calls involving individuals experiencing a mental health-related emergency. A 2022 U.S. Congressional report on specialized responses to mental health crises found three models typically used by law enforcement agencies:

- *Crisis Intervention Teams (CITs)*: Specially trained police officers provide initial crisis response in the field and liaise with mental health providers.
- *Co-Responder Teams (CRTs)*: Mental health clinicians embed in police agencies and respond alongside law enforcement officers in the field.
- *Mobile Crisis Teams (MCTs)*: Mental health clinicians respond with or without law enforcement assistance or triage.

To help address this issue, it's important to note that federal grants are available for local and state governments through both the U.S. Department of Justice and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. This funding can be critical to help law enforcement agencies work with their local community leaders to improve how they respond to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis or those with mental health disorders.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to address these important public safety issues. I'll be happy to answer your questions.

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