

**POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING**

**WESTMORELAND COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY NICOLE W. ZICCARELLI**

**JUNE 11, 2024**

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me here today alongside DA Dave Sunday and DA Brian Sinnett. It is a privilege.

There is no question that mental and behavioral health are major contributing catalysts to crime, and often times, fuel the drug epidemic.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections estimates that more than 35 percent of those incarcerated require some level of behavioral health treatment.

Locally, Westmoreland County Prison has had 293 inmates enrolled in varying mental health services for the month of May – and so far, this year, the prison has had 587 inmates receiving care for mental health – averaging approximately 55 percent of the prison’s population.

I believe there is a mental health crisis in our communities and as a collaborative, the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association penned a letter to Governor Shapiro in February, advising him of our concerns and requesting more services and resources to offer those suffering from mental health and substance abuse disorders. We are providing you a copy of that letter today.

The Governor previously recognized the needs we expressed by creating a Behavioral Health Council in the fall of 2023 in order to recommend a statewide action plan, but the problem persists and is, undoubtedly, bogging down the judicial system and prison population.

It is a complicated path to navigate.

While we are fortunate to have a mental health facility, Torrance State Hospital, in Westmoreland County, but there is limited availability. That leads to difficult decisions as to where to house violent offenders without compromising safety. The juvenile system's almost complete lack of beds to house violent offenders is devastating.

We must equip our police officers with resources and training as they routinely respond to people in mental distress.

While it is our duty to prosecute criminal offenses, I also believe it is our duty to prevent crime. I am particularly focused on our children in that regard and their mental health.

We are committed to being a trauma-assumed DA's office in Westmoreland County, not just one that is trauma informed. Meaning we don't just know about trauma, we assume our victims and witnesses have experienced it.

To help support the trauma-assumed approach, we enlisted the creative expertise of the Fred Rogers Institute in Latrobe to design a new victim/witness waiting room in our office.

Through grant funding via the Richard King Mellon Foundation and President Pro Temp Senator Kim Ward, we developed a space that is comforting and promotes a sense of healing to these victims who are, most likely, going through one of the worst times of their lives.

This room was actually inspired by a young woman who was the victim of a sexual assault at a very young age. While I was waiting for a verdict with her and her family, she did not want to sit in the old waiting room because it was traumatizing.

It didn't reflect the way we now understand to properly address mental health, and we could do better.

That's my point -- that together, we can come up with solutions to do better.

Another initiative I am extremely passionate about that addresses mental health and our youth is Westmoreland County's growing Handle with Care program.

Our pilot program was inspired by the tragic death of Azurree Charles, a 9-year-old boy in New Kensington. This was my answer to help the community heal and help prevent future crime as a result.

It's pretty simple: a law enforcement officer encounters a child who was exposed to a traumatic situation and makes a Handle with Care referral using a QR code that is intercepted by the school district, alerting the school and teacher to handle that child with care the next day.

If the need to intervene arises, the school district and Handle With Care team can respond appropriately – by providing mental health services – or addressing a food or clothing insufficiency in the house.

That response not only provides a safety net for the child physically, mentally and emotionally – but it strengthens the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

That single, positive interaction with an adult can change the entire trajectory of that child's life.

Since piloting this program in 2022, those police officers have made 312 referrals – 312 students in our community cared for and given a helping hand when they needed it most.

We hope that the children affected by this program will not end up as offenders housed in our prison system -- but will instead -- go onto become successful, productive members of society.

The Handle With Care Program has expanded from that pilot program in one district to upwards of seven additional school districts. It is my hope to have a county-wide program as soon as possible.

Lastly, but not least, our victim/witness department in the DA's Office is an assiduous, integral part of our team, working diligently and compassionately.

Our advocates can often be the liaison for crime victims in need of mental health services. By providing support and resources to these victims, it can potentially prevent them from turning to habits that may illicit criminal behavior.

However, to best provide these services there needs to be an increase in funding as their PCCD funding has not increased in eight years. That holds true for every DA's Office in the Commonwealth with a victim/witness division.

I would respectfully ask that you consider an increase in funding for those divisions as well.

Thank you for addressing these issues today.