



## **RICHLAND TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT**

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**Michael S. Burgan**  
*Chief of Police*

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Greetings, Senator Langerholc, distinguished members of the senate, and guests.

My name is Michael Burgan and I am currently the Chief of Police for the Richland Township Police Department. We are a 22-person full time police department located in southern Cambria County in suburban Johnstown. I have been a police officer for Richland Township for 36 years. After leaving the Marine Corps, I became a police officer and worked for municipal police departments in Somerset County before being hired by the Richland police in 1986. While a member of the Richland police department I have worked in every aspect to include patrol, investigations, drug task force and the Special emergency response team. I became Chief of the department in 2012. Since 2001 I have been a certified instructor for the Johnstown Regional academy both when it was at Greater Johnstown Career and Technology Center and currently work for Penn Highlands Community College. In my capacity as a general instructor I have been able to teach all aspects of academy training, as well as an Act 180 In-Service instructor for police officers recertification training that is done yearly.

Having served within Cambria County most of my adult life, I have witnessed many changes in crime and the criminal patterns throughout the county. The Township has changed from a residential area to an economic hub with a mix of defense industry and retail centers for the county. From when I started our main focus was on alcohol related incidents, and property crimes. Drug arrests were occasional; consisting mostly of marijuana and cocaine, as heroin was virtually unheard of. Our major focus of police resources was on community engagement.

The heroin epidemic has struck our area hard and fast. The use and sale of heroin is not only affecting the City of Johnstown, but all of the surrounding areas. It appears that every few days there is another AG drug task force raid being conducted on a drug supply house somewhere in the Johnstown vicinity. A 2013 study by the Johnstown Crime and Violence Commission indicated that heroin was one of the biggest problems facing our area. This is witnessed by the large influx of individuals from large urban areas across Pennsylvania, and its neighboring states.<sup>1</sup> This was shown by an indictment announced summer of 2021 by the US Attorney's office regarding a major drug investigation that originated in the Johnstown area. This investigation involved several local police departments as well as state and federal law enforcement. With this indictment they were able to take down 31 offenders in a drug ring that spanned Philadelphia, Montgomery County, Cambria County, Indiana County and as far away as California and the state of Delaware.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Johnstown Crime and Violence Committee; *"Final Report on Crime and Violence in Johnstown"* July 2013

<sup>2</sup> United States Attorney's Office Western District of PA; *"31 indicted in Cross-State Drug Trafficking Ring"* August 12, 2021.

This explosion also brought drug turf wars to our area with the majority of the homicides occurring within the City of Johnstown, but they would spill over into the Township and other suburban areas. These conflicts occurred with drug organizations mostly from the Philadelphia area but also from Pittsburgh, Columbus, and New York City.

The influx of heroin and now Fentanyl has not only impacted our volume of drug crimes but all of the ancillary crimes such as property crimes, robbery, and retail theft. This has had a huge economic impact on Richland Township due to the losses incurred by the stores from the thefts. We have had numerous occasions to re-arrest individuals several times for theft, with one repeatedly arrested as many as 16 times for thefts all related to her drug problem.. Collectively these losses are in the millions of dollars to the businesses within our area.

The effect of heroin and Fentanyl has caused a paradigm shift in many other aspects of crime in our area. Where we once saw driving under the influence as a major problem associated almost exclusively with alcohol, it has been exasperated by the influx of drugs into our area. Drug related DUI's in 2006 only accounted for 2% of all DUI arrests in the Township. It currently stands that DUI is down within the township but the numbers of DUI for controlled substance is substantially up. This now accounts for 40-50% of all DUI's in the township.<sup>3</sup> We began to see a decrease in heroin overdoses resulting in death or serious injury in 2017 due to the police use of Narcan; but unfortunately the pandemic apparently ushered in significant increases in the numbers of drug overdoses in 2021 and 2021. Fortunately, the use of narcan kept the death rate constant with previous lower rates.

One item that has also impacted departments within our area is the decision by PennDot to cease printing and issuing registration stickers. This has been a great deterrent to enforcement by my department as well as many others across this area. Though we have computers in the cars that we use to check the validity or registrations, we are continually being challenged in court over our authority to run the registration plates even though case law allows for it. The second issue affecting registration enforcement is that we go out and teach drivers about distracted driving with cellular phones but now we are telling our officers to routinely use the in-car computer while driving. To avert this we have had to turn to the purchase of two license plate readers. While expensive, this technology has greatly impacted our ability to combat the unregistered/misuse of registration violations. In the 12 months of 2021 we issued 102 citations for violations of the registration laws. As of April 20, 2022 in the first four months of their implementation we have issued 154 citations for violations.<sup>4</sup>This does not include warning/faulty equipment cards issued requiring them to be registered within the allotted time. Though a price tag of \$19,000 each is a large concern to municipalities, we believe that this is a safe method for to conduct the registration checks. Unfortunately with the price of one of the units over half the cost of one patrol vehicle, this is something that not all departments can purchase.

As for the future of law enforcement it does not seem as pleasant as one would hope for as I am preparing for retirement. Even though the climate of anti-police sentiment seems to be subsiding, the effects are going to be long term in retention and recruitment of police officers. We have seen this in new progressive laws that hamper law enforcements ability to perform simple tasks. These have also led to an increase in assaults on law enforcement officers as well as deadly encounters with police officers.

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<sup>3</sup> Richland Township Police Department; "*Criminal Arrest Data*" 2006 and 2017-2021.

<sup>4</sup> Richland Township Police Department; "*Citation Data*" January 1, 2021 to April 22, 2022.

This was tragically represented recently in Lebanon, Pennsylvania with the shooting death of a forty year veteran of the Lebanon City Police Department. This violence even came to our area in 2015 with the shooting death of a local officer Lloyd Reed, whom many of us knew. During the trial his killer was found not guilty due to self-defense. All of this has had a huge impact on recruitment and the quality of applicants. In many talks presented to college students they indicate they would not take a job where they can get killed and have people hate them when there are options for a safer, better paying job. My department has seen this ripple effect over the years from our first post 911 hiring in 2004 where we had a lists of over one hundred candidates to choose from to the latest list of five candidates in 2021. Even through this we have still been able to continue to maintain high standards for prospective officers. To this end we need the support of our politicians to effectively serve the citizens of our respective municipalities and the citizens of the commonwealth.

In closing, I thank you for your time and I appreciate the opportunity to address you on the focus of crime in our area.

Michael S. Burgan  
*Chief of Police*