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Congress of the United States
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August 24, 2000

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am here today to express my strong support for tougher law enforcement to punish those who would prey on the citizens of our city and our state. Mayor Smithgall, Police Chief Heim, District Attorney Totaro, and Councilman Mendoza deserve recognition for their efforts. I know that Lancaster will be a safer place because of their commitment.

By increasing the state's sentence to a mandatory minimum of five years in prison for any drug dealer who commits that offense while in possession of a firearm, a clear message is sent to criminals. It is a message that says, "We are serious about fighting crime. We are committed to ending gun violence. We are dedicated to winning the war on drugs."

At the federal level, in April, the House of Representatives passed a bill called "Project Exile: The Safe Streets and Neighborhoods Act." If enacted, this bill would establish federal grants to states that start programs similar to Virginia's Project Exile Program.

For the better part of the last decade, the Virginia capital had one of the nation's worst per capita murder rates. Then, in 1997, the U.S. Attorney's office in Richmond devised a strategy called "Project Exile." Under Project Exile, when a law enforcement officer apprehends a criminal with a gun, the criminal is "exiled" to federal prison for a minimum of five years. This approach yielded immediate results, with indictments against 404-armed suspects, a conviction rate of 86 percent and an average prison sentence of more than four and a half years. Meanwhile, Richmond posted a 36 percent decline in gun-related homicides last year.

Again, I want to express my strong support for cracking down on gun crimes. For the safety of the residents of Lancaster and all Pennsylvanians, I hope your efforts are successful.

Sincerely,



Joseph R. Pitts
Member of Congress