



RICHARD A. GOLDINGER
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

PATRICIA J. McLEAN
First Assistant District Attorney

Butler County

124 W. DIAMOND STREET • P.O. BOX 1208 • BUTLER, PA 16003-1208
PHONE 724-284-5222 • FAX 724-284-5460 • TDD 724-284-5473
www.co.butler.pa.us

Good morning members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is Richard Goldinger, and I am the District Attorney of Butler County. I want to thank you for inviting me to speak to you today regarding the heroin epidemic on Pennsylvania.

It was not that long ago that heroin was a drug that you only heard of, but never worried about because it was not in your community. Until the late 1990's, the drug of choice in Butler County was still marijuana. Cocaine and crack cocaine were being used by some drug abusers, but marijuana was still the only illegal drug that got much attention. That all changed for Butler County around the turn of the century.

Around the turn of the century, heroin suddenly appeared in my community, and it quickly spread like wildfire and became the immediate drug of choice for drug users in the community. Regrettably, it was not only drug users who succumbed to heroin. Countless young people who came from good homes somehow began using the drug. Rumors were rampant throughout the community that the drug was readily available in our high schools, even to the extent that it was rumored the entire basketball team at one of the high schools was using heroin. Young people were overdosing. I am even aware of a family where the mother and her daughter, who was a cheerleader in high school, both overdosed and died within months of each other. It seemed that nobody was immune from the heroin epidemic.

When heroin struck in Butler County, it seemed nobody was prepared for it. Once it hit, measures were taken to attack the problem. Education programs in school were put into place to teach children about the dangers of drugs, more so than they had ten years earlier. The District Attorney at the time created the Butler County Drug Task Force. This provided a law enforcement tool that was meant to directly take on the drug problem. Rehabilitation programs were formed and trained to deal with not just alcohol abusers, but also drug addicts. All of these actions by the community and by law enforcement helped to slow down the heroin problem in the mid to late 2000's.

Since that time, we have seen a new drug issue arise, and it is readily available in our homes. Unused prescription drugs suddenly became the cheap and easily accessible drug of choice in our community. Butler County, like many counties in Pennsylvania, has an aging population. Unfortunately, many of the elderly were prescribed medications for various conditions from which they may suffer. These pills could be retrieved by young family members by going to the medicine cabinet. Pills were being sold on the street for next to nothing. Drug users were faking injuries or pain with their doctors to be prescribed pain medication. Prescription pill abuse was the new epidemic.

To this day, we are still dealing with the prescription pill problem. However, an old foe has also returned, and I believe it is directly related to the prescription pill problem. Heroin abuse in Butler County is rapidly on the rise again. Referrals at the county drug and alcohol program for heroin addiction have nearly doubled in the last year. We have also seen an increase in drug arrests where heroin is the dealer's drug. Heroin users are often also pill abusers who will use whichever of the drugs are more accessible when the addict wants to get high. Both of these drugs are rampant in Butler County. How did we get to this point? There is not one reason why we are dealing with another heroin epidemic, but it is a combination of several factors, that, when all put together, make drug dealing possible in our communities.

Technology has certainly contributed to the ability to buy and sell drugs easily. Most adult people in our society carry a cell phone, making drugs a phone call away. The day of the pay phone is long gone, so an addict, or a dealer, does not need to get to a pay phone to arrange a drug purchase. This can be done anywhere, anytime, as long as there is cell phone service where they are located. It also makes it more difficult for law enforcement. Police cannot conduct surveillance of any particular area, like a pay phone, where they know a drug deal may occur. With cell phones, the dealer and buyer can be in contact immediately to avoid repetitive behavior or to find a more private spot for their transaction.

In smaller urban areas, like Butler, New Castle, or Greensburg, many longtime residents who resided within the city limits of those towns have either passed away or moved. The population of the city of Butler is about one-half what it was thirty years ago. Even though residents have left, the homes they lived in remain. In many of these instances, those homes have been purchased by landlords and made into apartments. Many of these apartments are HUD apartments. The end result is there is an abundance of cheap housing within the confines of these smaller cities. What we see in Butler is the drug dealers enlist a local, usually young female, to rent an apartment. The dealers will then come in for a short period of time, whether it be a weekend or for a week at a time, and deal their drugs. They then leave town before law enforcement has a chance to do anything about them. In Butler, we have seen dealers from Pittsburgh, Detroit, and now Philadelphia. At this time, the Drug Task Force knows the Philadelphia gangs are controlling the flow of heroin into our community. Unfortunately, most of these dealers are gone by the time law enforcement even finds out who they are, and most of the local users who could be utilized as confidential informants are too afraid of these Philadelphia dealers to make controlled buys from them.

We are aware of one individual who bought several houses within the city and is renting them as apartments. We also know the person, who is somehow aligned with the drug gangs from Philadelphia, will allow his dealer buddies to come to these houses and deal drugs. Despite all of this intelligence against this individual, the Task Force has been unable to secure any buys from him or his cohorts for the simple reason that all of the confidential informants are terrified of him. This is the sort of problem a small town must deal with when big city thugs appear.

Finally, because of the decrease in population, the city of Butler has a police force about half the size it had previously. Decreased tax bases mean less money to pay police. The reduction in the number of police patrolling our streets can easily explain why they are having a hard time winning the drug war. The Drug Task Force, which is made up of police officers from throughout the County, certainly does all it can, but those officers have their own communities to serve as well. They are not able to devote much of their time to fight the drug problem in the urban area when they have their own community issues, which also involves drugs, to deal with.

What can we do about these issues? Again, there is not one answer to these problems, but each problem has a workable solution that, if all are implemented, should help to alleviate the drug problem.

We need to get the unlawfully used prescription drugs off the street. The Pennsylvania District Attorney's Association is assisting members in implementing drug take back programs. Medication drop boxes will soon be available throughout the Commonwealth that will provide citizens the opportunity to safely dispose of unused or unwanted prescription drugs. The Drug Enforcement Administration also runs drug take back programs that allow people to turn in unused medication. These types of programs allow the community a way to dispose of these drugs, taking them off the streets and away from potential illegal pill users.

Technology is not going away, and is likely to only get better. Law enforcement needs to be equipped with the best technology available. This would include a system where cross jurisdictions can easily share information amongst each other. One of the issues we deal with in Butler County is information sharing with larger counties. As I stated, we are currently dealing with Philadelphia gangs selling drugs in our community. If there were some way that law enforcement in Philadelphia would be able to share information with law enforcement from our community with the click of a button, law enforcement would be more efficient and effective. Many of these people who have infiltrated our community are likely wanted elsewhere or are on probation in a different county. Any information that could quickly be shared that would assist in taking the dealers off of the streets would be beneficial.

Cheap housing is also not going away, but landlords need to be held accountable for what occurs in their rentals. Many cities have housing codes that need to be enforced against landlords who are not compliant. HUD standards must also be recognized by landlords. If a landlord rents an apartment to one person, and there are reports that several people have been living or staying at the apartment, the landlord should be penalized. Criminal background checks for HUD tenants should occur regularly. If a landlord is not compliant with local housing codes or with HUD requirements, the landlord should be penalized. Penalize a landlord one time and I doubt the landlord would allow his tenants to cause him to be penalized again.

The police departments simply have insufficient manpower to effectively fight the drug problem. Pure and simple, we need more police on the streets. Locally, we have tried different methods to combat the drug problem. One of the most effective methods of prevention is to park a police car in the vicinity of a known drug haven. We knew of a bar in the city of Butler where the Detroit drug dealers would go on weekends and deal. The police parked a marked unit one block away, and the dealing stopped for awhile. By the time the dealers returned a few weeks later, the Drug Task Force had elicited a confidential informant to make a buy from them. They were arrested and are serving several years in state prison. This example, however, is not the norm. The dealers outnumber the police on the streets at any given time. More police and police presence would assist in curbing the drug dealing.

Ultimately, all of this costs money, whether it be to hire more police, obtain the best technology available for law enforcement, hire more code enforcement officers to oversee landlords, or provide more treatment to drug addicts. There is no easy answer to this dilemma. I applaud the House Judiciary Committee for tackling this issue. I hope that my testimony today and that of my colleagues will assist you in crafting whatever legislation you believe will be beneficial to beating the heroin epidemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.