

## Judiciary Subcommittee Testimony

Ladies and Gentleman of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak here today.

My name is Mike O'Donnell. I am the District Attorney of Northumberland County. Prior to my election, I was a conflict counsel for Northumberland, Snyder, and Union Counties. During law school, I worked at a hospital with a mental health facility. My experiences as a public defender and working with mental health patients has helped shape my policies and perspectives for crime deterrence.

Due to the numerous variables that factor into crime deterrence and the limited amount of time we have to present; I will focus on crime deterrence for adults.

As I've always said, there's no better job security than the criminal justice system. During my time as a criminal defense attorney, I could never get my clients out of jail fast enough before they were back in.

Is this a systemic problem, or are these individuals too far gone to help?

The reality is that some individuals do not want help or simply not ready for the help that you can give them. Even with those barriers, the vast majority of people are ones that can still be removed from this life.

Mental health and addiction are a constant in factor in the criminal justice system.

Our mental health resources are woefully limited and need to be available to those on the front lines.

In Milton borough, Northumberland County, our law enforcement has retained a mental health expert as part of the police force to respond to crisis calls. Our police chief estimated that 10% of their total calls have a mental health component with it.

This program has been very successful. Many of the individuals are law enforcement encounters are reoccurring "frequent flyers," that have multiple interactions with law enforcement.

Having a mental health professional on the force allows our police force to have someone with an established relationship with the individuals when the call comes in. Not only does the mental health expert have an established relationship with individuals in the community, but he also has an established relationship with the potential resources and services around the county.

These calls often take a lot of time to deescalate the individual.

This preventative measure leads to a better result for our community because it frees up our officers to go to other calls but also prevents the individual calling from simply being arrested and sent to jail.

In Northumberland County, our jail is understaffed and under-funded. Our corrections officers are underpaid and overworked. We do not have the resources to handle mental health patients when they are incarcerated. If a defendant is suffering from a mental health episode, he most likely going to be placed on suicide watch, which leads to confinement, isolation from general population, a lack of resources in their cell, and in many cases, decompensation and deterioration of his or her condition.

In addressing substance abuse, we need to end the practice of “catch and release,” with no other intervention to address the underlying causes. Many of my past clients have no support system. And if they do have a support system, it’s often filled with enablers or individuals suffering from addiction themselves. Defendants without the skills to make changes almost universally return to the same patterns of criminal activity they were engaged in when they entered the system.

Community service programs and county work-release programs are among the most powerful reintegration tools available to Pennsylvania’s criminal courts. The only connection many defendants have to their communities are their criminal offenses. They are often unemployed, in some cases because they perceive themselves as unemployable, and thus return little to their community. Community service programs provide that connection by allowing defendants to provide something of value to their community. Many of my former clients have been offered permanent gainful employment as a result of their exposure to community service programs. A great many more defendants have, while gaining employment through a county work-release program, found long-term employment as a result of their work-release employment. Instead of leaving jail with no resources, those defendants in work-release programs leave jail with a paycheck and an opportunity.

I often use the analogy of building the foundation to a house. In order the build for the future, the foundation of the house must be strong enough to withstand the inevitable storm.

When someone is arrested and then released with no programs or support, the most often outcome is resorting back to the “support” system they have.

Rehabilitative and restorative corrections programs that support mental health, provide treatment for substance abuse disorders, and community integration must be the backbone of any legislation to address crime and recidivism in Pennsylvania, and I encourage the committee to robustly support these programs.

Thank you for the time to speak and for your consideration.