

Remarks of Attorney General Gurbir Grewal
Senate Budget Committee
Tuesday, April 24, 2018, at 10:00 am
Committee Room 4, 1st Floor
New Jersey Statehouse Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

Thank you, Chairman Sarlo, Vice-Chairman Stack, and members of the Senate Budget Committee. It is my pleasure to be here this morning and to discuss with you the work of the Department of Law & Public Safety.

This is my first opportunity to appear before the Legislature since my confirmation as Attorney General, and let me say that I remain as honored and humbled to serve as I was ninety-eight days ago. I follow in the footsteps of some extraordinary men and women who have held this office, and I intend to do everything I can to continue that proud legacy of service to the people of New Jersey.

As Attorney General, it is my responsibility first and foremost to ensure the safety and security of the residents of New Jersey. I take that obligation seriously, and I want you to know that I come to work every day thinking about what we can do to keep our fellow New Jerseyans safe from harm. In order to keep us safe, I have the privilege of directly overseeing more than 2,800 law enforcement officers within our Department, including detectives from the Division of Criminal Justice and members of the New Jersey State Police, and indirectly supervising tens of thousands more across the state. They are on the front lines and put their lives on the line each day to ensure our safety and wellbeing. I want to recognize their bravery, their commitment, and their sense of duty, and thank them for their service.

As you no doubt know, the Department of Law & Public Safety touches the lives of New Jersey residents in numerous ways. We serve as the state's lawyers. We investigate and prosecute crimes. We assist the victims of crimes and their families. We regulate a variety of industries important to New Jersey's economy, including gaming, boxing, horseracing, and the

distribution and sale of alcohol. We keep our highways safe. We protect consumers from fraud; we regulate the state's financial marketplace; and we oversee the licensing of various professions, including doctors, dentists, nurses, and pharmacists. We work to rehabilitate juveniles who become involved in the criminal justice system. And we fight to protect and preserve people's civil rights.

It's an awesome responsibility, but I know that the 7,700 men and women who make up the Department are up to the task. Over the past several months, I have been working hard to get to know as many of them as possible, both to learn about the work they do and to make clear my appreciation for their service. Our Department simply could not function without the efforts of so many career public servants who do exceptional work day in and day out.

It is also important to note that these public servants serve our state with great distinction regardless of which political party is in control or who happens to be the Attorney General. And so while I will be focusing today on our plans for the upcoming year, I also want to acknowledge the significant work our employees have done in the past year – before I got here – whether it was implementing bail reform, or tackling elder abuse, or aggressively prosecuting those who prey on children. Their successes are an important reminder that so much of our work transcends party politics and represents the best our state has to offer.

While the Department does so many things well, there are a number of initiatives that are particularly important to me. I have identified four key priorities that will be a focus of my tenure as Attorney General and where I hope to make measurable progress in the coming weeks, months, and years. My four priorities are:

- Expanding the Department's affirmative litigation program;
- Tackling drug addiction, especially in connection with the opioid crisis;

- Strengthening police-community relations; and
- Reducing violent crime, including efforts to reduce gun violence.

I'd like to briefly talk about each of these four areas.

First, we are working to expand the Department's capacity to bring affirmative litigation. As the state's chief law enforcement officer, it is my job to protect the interests of the State and its people. Over the past year, this mission has taken on an even greater urgency, as we now find ourselves facing an increasing number of difficult challenges and situations that adversely affect the lives of our citizens. Threats to our State's well-being have come in many forms and through many avenues, even from the corridors of power in Washington D.C. The EPA has dismantled clean air protections without seeking the type of public input required by law. The Department of Justice has placed illegal restrictions on federal grant funding to local law enforcement agencies simply because local officials have disagreed with their immigration enforcement priorities. And our President has forced the Department of Defense to discriminate against our brave men and women in uniform for no reason other than their gender identity. When any entity – even the federal government – takes action that harms our residents, or violates the law, or infringes upon our rights, I will stand up for what is right. I did not come to the Attorney General's Office to play politics, but I understand that as Attorney General I cannot allow politics to get in the way of doing this critical job.

It is also true that the current Administration in Washington has exercised its prerogative to shift priorities and institute new policies, placing greater emphasis on certain core governmental functions while reducing its efforts in certain other areas of enforcement. These choices can have a direct effect on the people of this State. To compensate for this reallocation of federal resources, we will need to expand our capacity at the State level to take on greater responsibilities to ensure that our environment, our workers, our consumers, and our financial markets are properly

safeguarded. As a result, we are ramping up our enforcement efforts, and we will pursue whatever remedies are available and appropriate when the need arises. I look forward to reporting to you next year about the actions we have brought over the prior 12 months.

Second, we are tackling drug addiction. As you all know, New Jersey has been hit hard by the opioid crisis. And even as the number of overdose deaths seems to be stabilizing in other states, the numbers in New Jersey continue to grow. These are not just statistics; these are lives ruined and families torn apart.

I grappled with this problem while I was Bergen County Prosecutor. We saw drug overdoses rising and we knew that we could not arrest our way out of the problem. So we created two new programs in Bergen County.

The first was the Heroin Addiction Recovery Team, or “HART,” which established walk-in hours for addicts and their loved ones at police stations. Under this program, people suffering from the disease of addiction could simply walk into a participating police station and turn over their drugs or drug paraphernalia without fear of arrest. We piloted the program in three police departments. In the first two months, we had 22 walk-ins.

The second initiative was Operation Helping Hand – an innovative partnership between county and local law enforcement, county government, and non-profit agencies that focused on getting drug defendants into treatment.

Helping Hand involves conducting a traditional “open air market” sweep, where law enforcement makes arrests of those purchasing heroin. At the police stations, recovery specialists and clinicians are awaiting the arrival of arrestees. The individuals in custody are not offered treatment in lieu of charges. Rather, they are told that if they successfully complete treatment, that information will be provided to the sentencing court for its consideration. When we tried the program in Bergen County, about half of the individuals arrested agreed to enter treatment, and a majority of those

who entered treatment remained in some form of treatment six months after the program.

These programs work – and they help us move away from a model where we lock up drug addicts and users for unnecessarily long sentences. That’s why, when I became Attorney General, I directed that we begin a process to take these programs statewide. We’re starting with pilot programs in five counties, with the goal of eventually enlisting all of our county prosecutor’s offices.

But our efforts extend beyond those two programs. My office is also vigorously pursuing the high-level traffickers and dirty doctors that make these drugs available to addicts and users. While it is critically important that we provide treatment to those who need it, we cannot shy away from aggressive prosecution of those who flood our streets with fentanyl and other drugs that kill our residents. My office will continue to use all investigative tools to root out those who harm our residents and bring them to justice.

To help coordinate these and other efforts, we recently created a new office in our Department: the New Jersey Coordinator for Addiction Responses and Enforcement Strategies, or “NJ CARES.” At the Attorney General’s Office, we have a number of tools to tackle the opioid crisis – not just treatment and criminal prosecution, but also the ability to strip irresponsible or incompetent doctors and pharmacists of their licenses, and the ability to bring civil enforcement actions against the corporations that misled the public about the safe use of opioids. The purpose of NJ CARES is to ensure that all of these efforts are coordinated – with a surgical focus on ending this crisis. This has long been a priority for me, and you can be sure that it will continue as Attorney General.

Third, we are strengthening trust between police and the communities they serve. Every day, law enforcement officers across New Jersey work closely with community organizations and members of the public to keep our streets safe. But that does not mean we cannot do better. Despite the

best efforts of many people, we know that in some instances divides exist between law enforcement and the community, especially among people of color. It is vital that we bridge these gaps -- both because it is the right thing to do and because it actually improves the effectiveness of the work of our officers.

Over the past three months, we have taken a number of concrete steps to demonstrate our commitment to building that trust. Since taking office, I have issued three Attorney General Directives: one that calls on law enforcement agencies, if a request is made, to release camera footage after officer-involved shootings; one that mandates drug testing for police officers; and one that requires the creation of “early warning systems” that help police departments identify officers who present behavioral issues before problems escalate.

In addition, earlier this month I asked former Justice Virginia Long to lead a panel to study the possibility of creating two new statewide units. One is a “cold case unit,” which would attempt to solve old crimes using new technology and other investigative tools, and the other is “conviction review unit,” which would review claims of actual innocence by those convicted of serious crimes. I look forward to receiving their recommendations later this year.

Our office also recently launched a new statewide initiative to strengthen police-community relations. Known as the “21-County, 21st-Century Community Policing Project,” we will be working with prosecutors in all 21 counties to host quarterly community events. The goal is to educate the public about specific issues relevant to the community and to foster communication between our police officers and the broader public, including religious leaders, youth groups, and civil rights organizations. All told, the initiative will result in more than 80 events across the state in the next 12 months. This spring, we will be focusing on law enforcement responses to officer-involved shootings, and especially the 2015 attorney general directive that requires independent investigations of such incidents under the supervision of the Attorney General’s Office. I will be personally

attending a number of these events around the state, and I hope that all of you, as well as other community leaders, can join us when we're in your neighborhood.

Lastly, we are working to reduce violent crime. Gun violence is a daily threat to our residents and our police officers, and I am committed to doing everything I can to make our streets and communities safer.

Although I cannot talk about ongoing criminal investigations, I do want to highlight one case we recently handled. Two months ago, we announced that the State Police helped dismantle a criminal organization that was trafficking firearms from Ohio to Camden. The operation recovered 17 dangerous guns from one trafficking ring, including two AK-47 assault rifles, an AR-15 assault rifle, and multiple pistols with illegal high-capacity magazines. No matter where you fall on the public debate about firearms, I think we can all agree that criminals should not be able to traffic these weapons into our state so they can be bought and sold by criminals on the streets of south Jersey.

I am proud to have in Governor Murphy, a partner who cares so deeply about confronting gun violence in our state and is so committed to stopping the flow of weapons. I was glad to stand with the Governor earlier this month as he announced an Executive Order calling on the Department of Law and Public Safety to look at ways to increase public awareness of this issue. It is important that people know and understand the breadth and nature of the gun violence taking place on our streets, the sorts of weapons that are being used to commit crimes in New Jersey, and the states where these weapons are coming from. We look forward to releasing this information in the coming months.

It's an ambitious agenda, but it's only the beginning. I very much welcome the opportunity to partner with the Legislature as we work together to have a real and meaningful impact on people's lives. I am immensely grateful to Governor Murphy for giving me the opportunity to serve the people of our

State in this great undertaking, and I look forward to working with all of you as we work to make New Jersey fairer, safer, stronger, and more just.

Thank you for inviting me to appear today, and I look forward to answering your questions.