

Remarks of Attorney General Gurbir Grewal
Assembly Budget Committee
Wednesday, April 3, 2018, at 10:00 am
Committee Room 11, 4th Floor
New Jersey Statehouse Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

Thank you, Chairwoman Pintor Marin, Vice-Chairman Burzichelli, and members of the Assembly Budget Committee. It's my pleasure to be here this morning to discuss with you the work of the Department of Law & Public Safety.

Let me start by thanking all of you for your support over the past year. You have entrusted me – and the 7,700 men and women of our Department – with protecting public safety and upholding the rule of law, and we take that responsibility seriously.

I would also like to thank the men and women of law enforcement, who put their lives on the line every day to keep us safe. I have the privilege of directly overseeing nearly 3,000 law enforcement officers within our Department – including members of the New Jersey State Police and the Division of Criminal Justice – and indirectly supervising more than 30,000 state, county, and local officers across New Jersey. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude, and I am committed to ensuring that they receive not only the respect, but also the support, they deserve.

Over the last year, I have been working hard to meet as many of my colleagues in the Department as possible -- both to learn about their work and to make clear my appreciation for their service. These career public servants are the backbone of our Department and they do exceptional work day in and day out. To them, I simply say: thank you!

As I explained last year, I have identified the following four key priorities that I intend to focus on during my tenure:

- Standing up for the rights of New Jersey residents in court;
- Fighting the opioid crisis;
- Reducing gun violence; and
- Strengthening police-community relations.

I'd like to provide a few, select examples to show how we're serving our residents in these areas – while at the same time being careful stewards of taxpayer dollars.

First, we are standing up for the rights of New Jersey residents in court. This past year, we have brought actions against those who pollute our air, land, and water; who undermine confidence in our financial markets; and who violate our residents' civil rights.

While we have achieved many successes, I am particularly proud of our efforts to revitalize the state's environmental enforcement program. Last August, we joined with DEP to file lawsuits across the state, taking polluters to task for the harm they've caused to our residents and resources. Those actions included three "natural resource damage" cases – or NRDs – the first such cases filed in a decade.

As of last week, we have now filed 9 NRDs, including one seeking to hold ExxonMobil accountable for the damage it caused to south Jersey communities, and four directed at DuPont and its affiliates for leaving a toxic legacy in the Garden State.

But we are not just pursuing large, corporate polluters. Every New Jersey resident is entitled to a clean environment, whether they live on a farm in

Warren County or in a densely populated urban area. That's why we have also launched an "environmental justice" initiative to pursue individuals and companies that have polluted economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Our goal is to make environmental protection work for every resident of this state.

During the past year, we have also stood up for New Jersey consumers. I'm pleased to report that we entered into historic multistate settlements with two major financial institutions: one with Wells Fargo, which will result in \$17 million for New Jersey, and another with UBS, which will bring \$5 million back to our state.

Unfortunately, our actions have not been limited to private individuals and entities. We have also had to bring actions against the federal government when it has violated the law and hurt our residents. That is why we have stood up, for example, to protect the rights of women; to ensure worker safety; to prevent oil drilling off our coast; to protect DREAMers from deportation; to allow transgendered officers to serve in our military; and to prevent a back-door tax increase on property owners.

In many of these cases, we have not acted alone. Instead, we have conserved resources by working collaboratively with our sister states, and together, we have realized many important victories. We will continue not only to push back when required, but also to push forward with our own vision of what a good, progressive, responsible government looks like.

Second, we are tackling opioid addiction. As you all know, New Jersey has been hit hard by the opioid epidemic. Even as the number of overdose deaths seem to be stabilizing elsewhere, they continue to rise here.

At the Attorney General's Office, we are using a number of tools to confront this crisis. Last year, we created a new office, known as "NJ CARES," to ensure that we're using all of our authorities – civil, criminal, and regulatory – in a coordinated way. I'm proud to report some early successes.

Last November, we sued Janssen Pharmaceuticals, a wholly owned subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, for deceiving prescribers and consumers about the dangers of its opioid products. With this lawsuit, we are showing that we are not afraid to take on powerful interests – even those based in New Jersey – when they threaten the safety and wellbeing of our residents.

To fight this crisis, we are also bringing criminal charges against those who illegally traffic opioids in our communities – regardless of whether they operate out of a board room, an exam room, or on a street corner. Just last month, State Police took down a heroin and fentanyl mill operating out of a luxury apartment in Harrison and arrested a number of individuals. And while the investigation is still underway, our preliminary analysis has linked the ink stamps printed on heroin packets produced at that mill to more than 80 deaths and over 220 total overdoses in the past 12 months.

But we also know that we cannot arrest our way out of this epidemic. That's why we continue to pair our enforcement efforts with innovative treatment and prevention strategies. One significant initiative is Operation Helping Hand, which is designed to divert low-level drug users out of the criminal justice system and into treatment.

By seeking a comprehensive solution that addresses both the supply and demand for addictive opioids, we believe we can make meaningful progress in ending this epidemic.

Third, we are working to reduce gun violence. As a career prosecutor, I've seen how gun violence can destroy lives and tear apart communities. Our country's gun violence epidemic is a full-blown public health crisis and we must respond to it using the same playbook we're deploying against the opioid epidemic – a multi-pronged approach that incorporates prevention, treatment, and enforcement.

With respect to enforcement, we are aggressively prosecuting violent criminals by taking down rings that traffic in guns and drugs. Recently, we dismantled an organization that trafficked unlawful, dangerous, and

untraceable firearms called “ghost guns” – the first such prosecution in this state.

We are also investing in prevention. Here in New Jersey, we have a robust background check system that keeps guns away from dangerous individuals, including felons, domestic abusers, and terrorists. That system works – but we also must guard against those who try to do an end-run around background checks by purchasing ghost guns or downloading 3D printable gun codes. In the past year, using new tools provided by this legislature and the Governor, we’ve taken both civil and criminal actions against those who try to exploit these loopholes.

But we must also supplement enforcement and prevention with effective treatment efforts. And to treat the root causes of gun violence, we must invest in the youth of this state. At the Attorney General’s Office, we are committed to working with other stakeholders to divert juveniles out of the criminal justice system and, wherever possible, keep them from entering the system in the first place. In this regard, I am particularly proud of the efforts of our Juvenile Justice Commission, which has realized historic reductions in youth incarceration, and in the coming year, plans to do even more.

Finally, we are strengthening trust between police and the communities they serve. Every day, law enforcement officers across New Jersey work closely with the public to keep our streets safe. But we can always do better. We know that divides still exist between law enforcement and the community. It is vital that we bridge these gaps – both because it’s the right thing to do and because it keeps our communities and our officers safe.

Last year, I launched a new statewide initiative to strengthen police-community relations. Through the “21-County, 21st-Century Community Policing Project,” or simply “21/21,” we’ve worked with our country prosecutors to host quarterly community events on issues that matter to the broader public. So far, we have discussed officer-involved shooting

investigations, the opioid epidemic, immigration enforcement, and bias crimes – and in the coming year, we plan to tackle topics such as campus sexual assault, juvenile justice, and veterans’ issues. I’m looking forward to these events – and I hope you can join us when we’re visiting your communities.

And while dialogue like this is important, we are also taking concrete steps. This past year, I issued a number of law enforcement directives to promote accountability and transparency in policing. One such directive requires law enforcement agencies to promptly release video footage of officer-involved shootings, while others require “early warning systems” and mandatory drug-testing for local police departments.

This coming year, we are re-examining how we collect, monitor, and analyze police use of force and developing new tools to root out excessive force and racial disparities. These changes, prompted in part by the *Star-Ledger’s* reporting, are good for our communities and good for police officers, who work hard every day to uphold the highest standards of the profession.

But strengthening trust requires more. At a time when surveys show Americans losing confidence in all of our public institutions, it is particularly important that we provide a model of good, effective government. To address the problem, we must work to root out the corruption and misconduct that breeds distrust in government, while also tackling the systemic issues that undermine confidence in our criminal justice system. That’s why, last fall, we launched a new unit – the Office of Public Integrity & Accountability – to focus on these issues and help develop solutions. I look forward to providing additional updates at next year’s budget hearing.

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Through all of our work in these four priority areas, we're committed to showing the people of New Jersey that we've got their back – and that we're going to stand up for their rights and interests.

We have an ambitious agenda but, with your support, I'm confident in our ability to carry it out. I am immensely grateful to Governor Murphy for the opportunity to serve the people of this state in this great undertaking, and I look forward to working with all of you as we make New Jersey fairer, safer, and more just.

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