

Notes for testimony Jan 17th at joint Senate hearing:

Good morning, thank you for having us today. My name is Jennifer Morrison, I am the Commissioner of Public Safety. One of my colleagues, Asst. General Counsel Tucker Jones is with you in person. We will only take a few minutes of your time to touch on some wave tops related to the current public safety landscape in Vermont. We look forward to more in-depth conversations as the session progresses.

Violent crime and crimes typically associated with the illicit drug trade are up.

- The Council of State Governments reports that violent crime in VT overall rose by 56% between 2012 and 2022. In this decade homicides rose 166% and rapes were up 76%. Yes, Vermont statistics are still slightly below the national averages. I don't know about you, but I don't take much comfort in that statement.
- In 2017 Vermont had the second lowest property crime and second lowest violent crime rates in the nation. By 2022, we had dropped to 18th lowest for property crime and eighth for violent crime.
- Just in our region, our rate of violent crime is higher than states like New Jersey and Connecticut and Rhode Island. It does not take a statistician to conclude that things are going in the wrong direction.

Between 2018 and 2022 shoplifting went up 45%, homicides were up 100% and thefts from motor vehicles were up 108%. These are just a few categories from our NIBRS data.

Between 2019 and 2022 violent crime FELL in 32 states across the U.S. But not here – we are one of the 18 states that saw an increase. Things are going in the wrong direction in Vermont.

For the record, my data is pulled from the Vermont Criminal Justice Data Snapshot published in Dec 2023 by the Council of State Governments and from our own NIBRS verified data. Data is necessary to inform our discussions, but it is a one-dimensional representation of very complex conditions on the ground. And, candidly, it sometimes becomes a distraction and pulls the focus away from the real issue – harm to people and communities.

In fact, I bet most Vermonters don't care about statistics. They care about what they see and experience when they walk or drive around their communities. I'd strongly encourage you to talk to the EMS providers, the local police and the business owners in Brattleboro, Bennington, Middlebury, St. Johnsbury, Burlington and well, any town in Vermont.

As we approach the issue of "public safety" we have to be willing to talk honestly about difficult topics and keep the focus where it should be – on people and communities. I'd like to offer up one difficult topic for conversation: What we are doing is not working. We must do better.

The approaches we have taken in the past five or more years are not working. Vermont is getting less safe, more Vermonters are dying from drug use and our public spaces and downtowns are suffering.

Vermont has leaned in heavily to harm reduction strategies for ten years now. Harm reduction is a vital part of the solution. But we still have record overdose deaths. It is clear that a piece of the puzzle is missing. We need to balance prevention, harm reduction, treatment and yes, enforcement in order to find the right path forward. I'll say a little bit more about enforcement in a minute, but I want to be clear that my emphasis on enforcement relates to BEHAVIORS – usually criminal activity, regardless of WHY a person is exhibiting those behaviors. We cannot give people a pass on criminal behavior that threatens the safety of others and destabilizes communities and businesses.

When we treat drug addiction as only a public health issue, we ignore the real harm being done in communities by those who are addicted to drugs and the dealers who bring with them a culture of violence and organized criminal activity.

To be sure, addiction is a terrible disease. But it is also unique amongst diseases in that drug addiction drags with it a lot of baggage. Addiction drags dealers and profiteers into our towns and cities. Addiction drags property crime such as retail theft and larcenies from motor vehicles with it. Addiction drags shootings and murders with it. It's here, in every corner of the State. Vermont communities and Vermont families are paying a high price for this disease called addiction.

Across the State we are hearing from Vermonters – community leaders, law enforcement, landlords, service providers, business owners and everyday citizens. They are fed up, afraid and frustrated with what is happening in their communities and they are asking for help.

A common refrain we are hearing from all over the state is that there is a lack of accountability in “the system”. We are hearing from arrestees that Vermont has a reputation for being soft on crime and that our “catch & release” policies are well known in source cities across the northeast and mid-Atlantic area. We need to rebrand Vermont so that it is no longer known as “open for business” by drug dealers and others who operate for profit, at the expense of Vermont’s most vulnerable.

We are hearing a lot about the harm done in communities by repeat offenders. Some “familiar faces” are racking up dozens of charges and continue to victimize others in the community with relative impunity. I could go on, but you have undoubtedly been hearing similar things from your constituents. We need legal tools to address non-compliant offenders, quickly intervene and stop behavior that is harming our communities.

I will end by saying that law enforcement will continue to:

1. Aggressively seek out and arrest those who prey on VT’s most vulnerable for profit. These arrests must be accompanied by **certain, swift and fair consequences**. And, we must be realistic that we cannot arrest our way out of this epidemic of drug addiction and attendant violent crime.
2. In addition to investigation and arrests, we need coherent policies and strategies that will **Reduce the demand for illicit drugs**. Reducing the demand for illicit drugs – not continuing to facilitate and normalize drug use – is paramount. That may involve re-examination of policies related to drug possession and low level distribution. It will undoubtedly require consideration of a more balanced approach that includes more than just carrots. The path to reducing demand for illicit drugs may have to include more sticks. Those sticks just might save lives and Vermont’s quality of life.

Thank you. Turn over to Tucker.