

Good morning Senators, thank you for inviting me here today.

My name is Dee Barbic and I am the Director of the Violence Prevention Task Force. For background the violence prevention task force was established in August 2022 as part of Governor Scott's 10-Point Public Safety Plan

The Task Force is comprised of senior executive branch level members, including the Secretaries of the Agencies of Education, Digital Services, and Human Services and the Commissioners of Department of Health, Public Safety, Corrections, Children and Families, as well as the Chief of the Criminal Division of the Office of the Attorney General and the Executive Director of the Office of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs.

The task forces works to identify best practices and innovative approaches for effective and sustainable community violence prevention.

Additionally, the task force looks for areas where changes and improvements can be made to prevent violent crimes and hold offenders accountable, which includes identifying gaps in policy and working to close those gaps. This includes working collaboratively among agencies to address public safety issues to include school safety.

What we are hearing from our communities is a lack of accountability for offenders, which has been referred to as "Catch and Release". Some call it a revolving door. This creates a lack of deterrence for criminal behavior and disregard for the safety of our communities.

As the commissioner said in her testimony, we have seen an increase in the rates of property crimes and violent crimes in Vermont. Along with that, I believe the States Attorneys will present information on an increase in criminal activity by repeat offenders. Property crime rates to include larceny and MV theft have been trending UP over the last several years in Vermont while the rest of the country has been trending down.

In some instances when comparing Vermont crime rates to the national average we may be lower but when looking at trends over the last several years, Vermont is trending up in these areas. As the Governor noted in his state of the state address: According to the "Council of State Governments" ... in 2017 Vermont had the 2nd lowest property **AND** violent crime rates in the nation. In 2022... we dropped to 18th and 8th.

These are not just numbers. These are the things that our communities, are experiencing and feeling first hand.

We have not been holding offenders accountable – and are seeing multiple violations of COR and failures to appear for court hearings - and the individuals continue to remain in the community committing crimes. We have an obligation to keep our communities safe, and we are not meeting that obligation.

Our retail businesses are seeing increases in theft and, with that, more violent behaviors as well. We have heard from retail business owners that they are experiencing thefts that are clearly organized business enterprises, and the individuals committing these crimes know that there will be no accountability for their actions.

There needs to be a balance in how we address criminal behavior. This is not solvable by one strategy or solution, but as many pieces of a “complex problem” and requires a combined effort that includes policies that address the demand for illicit drugs and holding drug dealers accountable through swift and appropriate consequences. What we have in place at this time is not working to deter criminal activity and accountability for actions. We need to implement additional tools that will.

An example of just a few areas that can address some of what we are experiencing include:

Addressing individuals who repeatedly violate their conditions of release. This cannot continue to be a revolving process of paperwork. We need to ensure that cases are being adjudicated in a timely manner, and we need to ensure that appropriate sanctions are imposed at the time of arraignment, which is a step that aligns with accountability.

Current laws can be modified so that violation of COR is no longer another misdemeanor crime in which a citation is issued to appear at yet another court date weeks if not months down the road but instead provide courts with the tools they need to hold individuals who repeatedly fail to comply with court orders.

We are also supporting efforts to roll back the 2018 bail reforms that have capped bail at \$200 and made it practically impossible to hold individuals for failing to appear for court. We will also oppose further efforts to eliminate cash bail.

Work can be done to modernize our drug crimes:

Tucker Jones testified to the prevalence of fentanyl in the drug supply in Vermont. We are also seeing an increase in Xylazine, for which we know Naloxone is less effective. Xylazine also has debilitating physical side effects.

Drug traffickers are preying on our most vulnerable populations. Improving our drug laws related to trafficking and dispensing with death resulting in S. 58 is a means to address these issues.

Finally we would like to see movement on a system of universal sealing versus expungements with access to criminal records for criminal justice purposes. It's difficult to have confidence in our data on crime when we erased over 20,000 criminal records just last year.

We are hearing the frustration and fear from our communities. Changing this will require addressing these issues using a variety of tools that include not just incentives or carrots, but also incorporates measures that hold offenders accountable.

Thank you.