

**TESTIMONY ON IMPACTS OF
PENNSYLVANIA'S DRUG EPIDEMIC**

**PRESENTED TO THE
Members of the House and Senate policy committees**

By

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County of Lycoming

August 30, 2016

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Good afternoon, my name is Tony Mussare and I am a Lycoming County Commissioner, Chairman of the Prison Board, and President of the Lycoming/Clinton County Joinder Board which oversees Lycoming Children & Youth and MH/ID. Thank you for holding this hearing in Lycoming County and taking time to listen to our needs and help us find solutions to our heroin and opioid epidemic.

In November of 2012 I received my first of many phone calls from a parent who pleaded with me-- and I'll quote, "please leave my child in prison; it is the only way he will stay alive." At first, I thought to myself, what type of parent wants their child to stay in prison? Only after becoming aware of how heroin and opioids affect those who take these drugs and the toll it extracts on their families, could I begin to understand WHY such a plea was made.

Her child, as well as four other children whose parents personally called me, overdosed, died and were laid to rest. In each case these parents asked me why our county government failed to save their sons and daughters while they were under the supervision of the County's courts and Adult Probation Office. Their nightmares will never disappear and that brutal reality of losing their next generation will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

This mother's plea demands that we to ask ourselves what did she know that the policy makers and legislators in Harrisburg and Washington D.C. did not?

She knew that her family's-- and specifically her child's -- only HOPE was incarceration. She painfully understood that the standard 14 to 28 day drug rehabilitation program ordered by the courts fails families time and time again. Given this rate of failure, I think we must ask ourselves why we continue to waste limited precious dollars on short term programs that have very little effect on the addict.

Rather, I recommend the state and federal governments identify resources to fund long term programs and construct what I will call "confined addiction facilities" Please note I did not say build more prisons. I agree with the growing consensus of experts that heroin and opioid addiction is a disease and therefore incarceration is not the answer --- long term intensive care is! Let me be clear about what I mean by "long term"--- not a 30-45 day program but a 6-9 month period at an intensive treatment facility.

The success of treating addiction is not measured by the addict never using drugs again. Instead, it is measured by how long the addict stays clean. In terms of the financial impact of this drug epidemic has to the County, consider three salient facts: every day the addict or recovering addict is not using or using our criminal justice systems we 1) save our taxpayers \$70 a day in our prison overcrowding expenses, 2) save our sheriff's department between \$80 to \$300 a day in transportation cost, and 3) save our community hundreds (even thousands) of dollars a day by the addicts not committing crimes that are associated with heroin and opioid addiction. Counties can redirect those dollars for intense long term monitoring.

In fact, if we deal with the drug addiction epidemic proactively and comprehensively, we can reduce the real-world strain on our police departments, sheriff's office, our court system, probation offices, and especially our prison & parole system. We could realign our focus away from criminal justice approaches and toward long-term/sustained rehabilitation & recovery programs that work!

In 2012, Lycoming County experienced a consistent overcrowding prison population for the first time in decades. Through a collaborative effort between the District Attorney's office and the president judge, and with the advice of Congressman Tom Marino, the county commissioners monitored and evaluated our options to combat both the overcrowding and our increase in heroin and opioid trafficking. At a cost of \$880,000 per year, the County contracted with GEO, a re-entry service company, that uses evidence based practices and cognitive behavior skills to reduce the rate of recidivism and prison overcrowding.

Our District Attorney, Eric Linhardt, with the concurrence of the commissioners, implemented the county Narcotics Enforcement Unit (or NEU). County taxpayers cover 75% of this annual \$400,000 cost with state picking up the balance. Let me assure you that we are seeing positive results with both the GEO Reentry and NEU programs.

Lycoming is a fifth class county with a median household income of \$45,877—far below the state and national median incomes of approximately \$53,200. The median earnings for individual workers residing in Lycoming county is only \$26,567. This means that half of our working population makes less than this \$26 thousand dollar figure. Our county seat is located in the city of Williamsport which struggles with its economic base since 27% of the city's population lives under the poverty level. Given these daunting income figures, the commissioners had to make a tough decision when we agreed to raise taxes to implement those programs and strategies that would make our communities safer and deal with the power of addiction.

I firmly believe we need state and federal dollars to combat this drug epidemic by realigning the funding priorities in Harrisburg and Washington DC. I believe we can accomplish our goals without raising state or federal taxes.

I also suggest state legislators examine our current state laws on marijuana and paraphernalia. Although their impact pales in comparison to heroin and opioids, they consume just as many County resources because of their illegality.

As a further cost control measure I strongly recommend reducing the number of school districts in our state. Consolidating some of our 501 districts into larger more efficient units would save enough state funds to help cover the expense of additional Adult Probation Officers. This in turn would enable these officers to reduce their case load and allow them to focus on the addicts and their recovery/rehabilitation.

From a federal government perspective, we need to stop sending billions of taxpayers' dollars to Iran and other countries that despise us and our way of life. I recommend we redirect those funds to build confined addiction facilities across America. We need DC leadership to help us bring HOPE to our families and our community.

In closing, I no longer want to have to hug those parents and cry with them at their child's funeral. I want to smile and rejoice with those families by helping them deal with this lifelong addiction. I want to be able to say to them that our legislative leaders made the right choices by supporting and funding programs that work for opioid and heroin addicts.

I thank you in advance for making those tough decisions.