



PA House of Representatives
Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120
(717) 260-6144

Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
“Protecting Victims: Solutions to Combat Stalking”

September 4, 2024, at 1:00 p.m.

Upper Bucks County Technical School
3115 Ridge Rd
Perkasie, PA 18944

- 1:00 p.m. Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance
- Law Enforcement Panel**
- 1:10 p.m. Nicholas Virnelson
Interim Police Chief, Bedminster Township Police Department
- 1:15 p.m. Matthew Phelan
Ret. Police Chief, Bedminster Township Police Department
- 1:20 p.m. Hon. Jennifer Schorn
District Attorney, Bucks County
- 1:25 p.m. Questions for the Law Enforcement Panel
- Empowering Victims Panel**
- 1:55 p.m. Gayle Marinelli
Resident, Bucks County
- 2:00 p.m. Laurie Hepler
Victim Advocate, Bedminster Township Police Department
- 2:05 p.m. Questions for the Testifiers
- 2:35 p.m. Closing Comments



Testifier Biographies

PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing *"Protecting Victims: Solutions to Combat Stalking"*



Nicholas Virnelson **Interim Police Chief, Bedminster Township Police Department**

Nicholas Virnelson currently serves as the interim police chief of the Bedminster Township Police Department.

Since joining the department in 2013 as a patrol officer, Nick has steadily advanced through the ranks, earning promotions to corporal and then sergeant, where he was serving at the time of Police Chief Matt Phelan's retirement. His leadership and extensive experience in criminal investigations, emergency management, and officer training have been instrumental in his role, including sharing interim officer-in-charge duties.

Nick holds a B.S. in Administration of Justice with a minor in Sociology from Pennsylvania State University, and an M.S. in Law and Legal Studies from Pennsylvania Western University. He has completed the Public Safety Executive Management program at Northwestern University's School of Police Staff and Command. Nick is also a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Law Enforcement Executive Leadership Association and the Central Bucks County Special Response Team, among other professional affiliations and trainings.

Matthew Phelan **Ret. Police Chief, Bedminster Township Police Department**

On July 30th, 2024, Chief Matthew Phelan retired from the Bedminster Township Police Department after a distinguished career in law enforcement.

Matt's career began with the Tinicum Township Police Department, where he served from 1998 to 2007 and again from 2009 to 2020, rising through the ranks from Patrolman to Chief of Police. Between 2007 and 2009, he served as the Assistant Director of Safety and Police at Bloomsburg University. In 2020, Matt joined Bedminster Township as the Chief of Police, where he led the department with dedication until his retirement.

Matt now embarks on a new chapter in his career, educating the next generation of law enforcement officers at the Upper Bucks County Technical School.





Hon. Jennifer Schorn
District Attorney, Bucks County

Jennifer Schorn, a Bucks County native with over a quarter-century of experience as a prosecutor, became the Bucks County District Attorney in January 2024.

She grew up in Upper Southampton Township and is a graduate of Archbishop Wood High School, and Widener University Law School.

Jennifer joined the Bucks County District Attorney's Office as an Assistant District Attorney in 1999. She was appointed the First Assistant District Attorney in 2021 after previously serving in the dual role of Chief of Trials and Chief of the Grand Jury Division.

Gayle Marinelli
Resident, Bucks County

Gayle Marinelli has been a resident of Pipersville for the past 10 years, after previously living in Lambertville, NJ.

Originally from Mt. Carmel, PA, Gayle has dedicated nearly 30 years to teaching 6th graders in the Hatboro-Horsham School District.



Laurie Hepler
Victim Advocate, Bedminster Township Police Department

Laurie Hepler serves as the Civilian Community Relations Specialist for the Bedminster Township Police Department, where she administers support services for crime victims and leads crime prevention programs.

With over a decade of experience as an Administrative Assistant in the department, Laurie has developed a deep understanding of community needs and law enforcement processes. She holds a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Temple University and a master's degree in English from Liberty University, providing her with a unique skill set that combines academic knowledge with practical experience.

PFA Legislation Hearing 9/4

Submitted by Nicholas Virnelson

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak in front of you today. Representative Labs has been focused on legislation that would close loopholes to the existing PFA laws. These loopholes are not frequently exploited as cases like the one I am going to tell you about do not happen often, but they do exist. Bedminster Township is a rural community that is 32 square miles and has about 7300 residents. If cases like this can happen here, it can happen just about anywhere.

The name of the victim has been changed to protect their identity.

In 2015, Jane was standing on a bridge in New Hope, PA, when Andrew approached her saying "Hi Jane" and continued to speak using her name several times. She denied knowing Andrew, and ignored him. Over the next several months while she was at restaurants in the Doylestown area she began noticing Andrew, who was always by himself, often looking at her. On one occasion he was standing outside of the bathroom when she was walking out and attempted to engage in conversation. Over the next several years Andrew used real and fictitious social media accounts to harass Jane, by calling her derogatory names, sending her sexually explicit photos, and pretending to be her family members. During this time Jane had changed residences several times in various states in the western US.

In 2021, Jane called the Bedminster Police as she believed she was being stalked by Andrew, whom she has not seen in years. She realized this once a neighbor had caught Andrew parked outside of her house and took a picture of him then posting it to social media. Once this report was made police identified Andrew as being a suspicious person they have observed around Jane's house on multiple occasions over the last several years. Jane was instructed to obtain a protection from abuse order while police conducted an investigation, but she was not eligible because she did not have any relationship to Andrew.

Over the next year, Andrew continued to be found almost daily during the daylight and midnight hours parked outside of Jane's house or walking around the back of her house. At times he was seen to be in possession and/or using binoculars and two enhanced listening devices, one being a parabolic microphone and the other a device that must be pressed against a wall to hear on the other side of the wall, both used for the interception of communication.

Andrew was observed in this neighborhood so frequently that some neighbors knew his car by license plate, and would expect to see him while they were about, and often took photographs for police. The police had several conversations with Andrew about his actions, which did not have any impact. During this year, Jane lived in fear for herself and her young child. She had to

advise her daughters school about Andrew and to not allow anyone else to pick her up, she changed her daily habits so it was not routine, purchased security cameras, a firearm and took firearm training lessons, and upgraded other home security features to protect herself and her daughter.

During this year police worked diligently, estimated over 1,000 hours building a stalking case against Andrew. Eventually, an arrest warrant was issued for Andrew. He was contacted to come to the Bedminster Police headquarters, but decided to drive around the victims residence one more time beforehand, where he was taken into custody behind Jane's residence. During a subsequent search warrant of Andrew's vehicle the following items were found: a handgun, purchased within the last several days, several hundred rounds of ammunition, a book bag, duct tape, binoculars, and a box of condoms. One can only assume the next plan of Andrew was to harm Jane or her 2 year old daughter. Andrew was arrested and was incarcerated for nearly two years as a result of his ongoing actions.

If Jane was able to obtain a Protection From Abuse Order at the beginning of this investigation, police would have been able to make a swift arrest of Andrew and it could have saved a lifetime of mental suffering, as she is on the constant lookout for Andrew to return.

Stalking Information for New Legislation

Sept. 4, 2024

Submitted by Gayle Marinelli

End of marriage

PFA

Negotiating divorce-stalking starts

Examples of the stalking and harassment

Abrupt pause in the stalking

Back in court to discuss our divorce

Questions about our assets; he states the purchase of a new car

I'm clueless-don't remember anything else of that meeting

Neighbors and friends saw him

The need to know about the abuser's vehicle

In court again to pay him alimony

Court ordered to pay my abuser over \$700/month

Closure and thank you

Submitted by Laurie Hepler

September 4, 2024, Policy Hearing talking points

- Law enforcement-based victim advocate model
- Legal blind spots, gaps, and how it impacts victims of stalking, harassment, and abuse
- PFA eligibility and enforcement
- PFA Database
- Conclusion