

Paradise Lost

Written Testimony of Lawrence County District Attorney Joshua D. Lamancusa

Lawrence County, a county of just under 90,000 citizens, is classified as a rural community but crime in the county seat, New Castle, rivals any comparable district in the city of Pittsburgh. The county is uniquely situated between three major highways connecting it to Youngstown, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, and the City of Pittsburgh. Its proximity to this highway infrastructure has resulted in the constant flow onto its county and city streets of the preeminent drug in the United States: Heroin.

Heroin firmly became the most prevalent drug in the county sometime in 2012, after the arrests of the 2nd largest prescriber of prescription pain medication in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania who was living in Lawrence County, and the arrest of the county's largest illegal pain pill dealer. Their arrests signaled the end of the inexpensive supply of opioid pain medication in our community and created a demand for an inexpensive opioid alternative. Presently the price of one Roxicodone tablet ranges between \$25 to \$35 per pill compared to the price of one stamp bag of Heroin that ranges between \$8 to \$10. The opioid demand that was created by irresponsible medical prescribing guidelines, negligent physicians, and illegal street dealers set the stage for the inevitable rise of Heroin as the drug hegemon. Once Opioid addicts could no longer afford to maintain their habit at the ever-increasing prices, they turned to the stronger, readily available and cheaper alternative, Heroin.

The District Attorney's Office in Lawrence County prosecutes nearly 1600 cases per year in the Court of Common Pleas and roughly 90% of those cases have some nexus to drugs. Of those cases nearly 80% of them involve Heroin. That translates to a little over 1100 citizens in Lawrence County that commit crimes (the burglars, robbers, thieves, shoplifters, etc...) are doing so to maintain a Heroin addiction.

Law Enforcement in Lawrence County has evolved to address this threat through the creation of a Special Investigative Unit (SIU) within the Office of the District Attorney. This unit is comprised of county and local police officers, which have been detailed to the unit, to work only narcotics cases. The SIU is led by the former director of the Manhattan, DEA Drug Task Force, and working relationships have been established with multiple DEA groups out of Pittsburgh, the Office of Attorney General, the ATF and the Pennsylvania State Police. This unit targets mid to upper level drug dealers with the assistance of state and federal law enforcement agencies. The unit has conducted over 160 high-risk drug raids since its inception in 2010 and its efforts have led to the incarceration of hundreds of mid to upper level drug dealers, the seizure of more than one thousand illegal firearms, and the large-scale forfeiture of illegal drugs and monies. Despite the many notable successes of the unit and its unprecedented efficiency, local policing efforts can only serve to diminish, not eliminate, the supply of Heroin and other illegal narcotics. However,

in the absence of more reasoned and coordinated federal drug policy their efforts are essential despite their inability to provide a complete solution.

John Milton's warning in *Paradise Lost*, "[we] may find, who overcomes by force, hath overcome but half his foe," is one to be heeded when considering how to combat our Heroin epidemic. Since we cannot arrest our way out of this nationwide nightmare, we must seek to diminish demand and allocate resources to help rehabilitate those suffering from addiction. State monies allocated to rehabilitative services must not be diminished in the interests of tax cuts or other projects of legislative priority. Movement towards insufficiency in the allocation of rehabilitative resources is indicative of a fundamental lack of understanding that drug addiction permeates every demographic and negatively impacts every part of our society. Locally, Lawrence County through a partnership between the Office of the District Attorney and the Lawrence County Drug and Alcohol Commission is a few weeks away from launching an advertising campaign in the form of billboards, yard signs, newspaper ads and a website, all designed to inform the public about the wide array of treatment options and support groups located within the county. Too many suffering citizens and their families are not aware of the many treatment options available or support systems within the community. Education about the already available programs and organizations dedicated to rehabilitation seems almost basic but experience has taught us that most new addicts and their families do not know where to turn for help. This advertising campaign, like most of our police equipment and officer training, will be paid for using forfeited monies from drug cases, thereby incurring no additional cost to tax payers.

Lastly, though not always directly related to the Heroin epidemic, we cannot ignore those individuals that have paid their debt to society for their wrongdoing and expect them to seamlessly assimilate back into the law abiding working populace without meaningful assistance. Presently the state correctional institution maintains a 50% - 70% recidivism rate for convicts released between 1-3 years. Recidivism of this magnitude only serves to guarantee that most previous offenders return to the criminal justice system leaving behind a wake of new victims. Recent research has found that economic distress predicts individual and family outcomes, including marital dissatisfaction and family conflict. Therefore relevant skills training and economic opportunity incentives must be pursued to ensure that those at risk individuals are not forced back into criminal behavior.

In an effort to reduce recidivism in Lawrence County, the Office of the District Attorney launched a pilot program in February 2014 entitled "Jail to Jobs." The program is available only to convicted felons (only sex offenders are excluded) and participating members of the local drug court program. The program coordinator matches participating individuals with available local employment opportunities and provides information to employers about already existing federal bonding and tax credit initiatives. Since its inception, two hundred and forty four (244) felons and drug court members have been hired through the program. To date two hundred and thirty (230) members are presently working and only three (3) participating members reoffended since release (Recidivism Rate - 1%). Despite the small sample size and infancy of the program it has produced extraordinary results for participants who had long histories of sustained criminality.

Despite limited resources within Lawrence County, the community continues to pursue strategies that police criminal conduct, provide treatment for drug-addicted citizens and rehabilitate those who have paid their debt to society. However, local initiatives cannot accomplish widespread lasting change without the support of state and federal officials. It is my hope that the men and women we have elected to lead our Commonwealth have the foresight and patience to pursue long-term community strategies that will benefit all of its citizens.