

June 29, 2020

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning and member of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. I am Chief Tom Synan and I urge you to pass SB3. As a police chief with over 20 years of experience and a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, I've dedicated my life to serving my community and country. I have seen a lot, including an entire family die from addiction. I've seen a generation of brothers lost and grandparents raising the kids left behind. Our past efforts to address this epidemic have failed.

The COVID pandemic has demonstrated what happens when we fail to adequately prioritize public health, something Ohio has struggled to do in response to addiction.

Addiction is one of the most critical and complex issues our state has faced. In 2018, the most recent year of data on overdose deaths, Ohio lost more than 3,700 residents to a fatal overdose, doubling the number of Ohioans who died of an overdose nearly a decade ago in 2009.

We cannot continue with the same approach that is failing to stem the crisis in our state, and needlessly sends people with addictions to prisons that are harmful to their health.

Senate Bill 3 gives us an opportunity to chart a new path.

All of the evidence demonstrates responding to minor drug possession with felony convictions and incarceration only worsens the drug problem. People are cycled through the justice system, and less likely to receive life-saving treatment or recovery. They are often released worse off than when they entered.

A felony conviction also makes it incredibly difficult to get a job, pursue an education, find an apartment, or other essential steps to a stable life that contribute to successful recovery and public safety. This is why I often say our justice system is one of the worst enablers of addiction.

The lessons we are learning from the COVID-19 outbreak and the challenges that overcrowded prisons present should lead us to act quickly in passing Senate Bill 3. During COVID-19, justice system officials around Ohio successfully used alternatives to keep low-level and non-violent offenders out of jails and prisons. The public health and safety success of that approach should allow it to continue for minor drug possession.

Senate Bill 3 was born out of bipartisan partnership between Republican Franklin County Prosecutor Ron O'Brien and Columbus City Attorney Zack Klein that continues with Republican and Democratic leaders in the Senate.

SB 3 would prioritize treatment by reclassifying low-level, non-violent drug possession from a felony to a misdemeanor. It would change our approach from punishing someone for their addiction to holding them accountable for working toward their recovery. It would also remove the barriers that felony convictions create to successful recovery.

Twenty other states, including Oklahoma, already treat low-level drug possession as a misdemeanor in all or some circumstances. The public safety results are positive.

Reducing felony convictions and incarceration for drug possession lets focus their limited law enforcement and criminal justice resources. In fact, the states that have reduced imprisonment the most have seen the largest declines in crime.

When my officers get a call about someone with a drug problem, we want to help solve the underlying problem. We serve as a link, connecting that person to health and treatment professionals who can reduce recidivism by assisting them into long-term recovery.

Senate Bill 3 would build on local solutions and help our state invest in recovery-based alternatives that are proven to break the cycle of addiction. In Hamilton County, we will be launching the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, which connects people struggling with addiction to case managers who help stabilize their lives. The program has successfully reduced recidivism by over 50 percent in other jurisdictions.

We simply cannot afford to stay on our current course. Ohioans are dying of addiction, our prisons are crowded with low-level drug offenders and our state dollars are being wasted. Now, those prisons threaten to spread additional health challenges into our communities, in addition to worsening addiction.

Senate Bill 3 is an evidence-based solution to end the cycles of drug addiction, allow our communities to heal, and make sure we never lose another generation to drugs. I encourage all of our legislators to act with urgency.

Thank you for your time and your leadership.

Chief Tom Synan  
Newtown Ohio