

JUSTICE NEWS

Opening Statement of Attorney General Jeff Sessions Before the Senate Judiciary Committee

Washington, DC ~ Wednesday, October 18, 2017

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, distinguished Members of the Committee—my former colleagues—thank you for this opportunity. It is the honor of a lifetime to serve as the Attorney General of the United States. You can be sure that I understand the importance of the office I hold.

Every single day, the men and women of the Department of Justice work to protect our national security against terrorist threats, to defend the civil rights of all Americans, to reduce violent crime in our communities, to stop deadly drug dealers and their organizations, and to strengthen the rule of law. Today, I would like to report on some of the important things we are doing.

The Department works is resolutely focused on protecting the American people from terrorism and uses all lawful means to keep the American people safe. Make no mistake—this threat is real. As ISIS loses ground in the Middle East, they will not stop trying to send terrorists to this country.

The President's executive order is an important step in ensuring that we know who is coming into our country. The order is lawful, necessary, and we are proud to defend it. The Supreme Court has vacated one court's injunction and we are confident that we will ultimately prevail.

We know that violent crime is rising. For two years in a row, we've seen the fastest rise in violent crime in 25 years, and the highest increase in the homicide rate in 49 years. This is not a blip; but it is not an inevitable trend that we cannot reverse.

The President understands this well.

In one of his first Executive Orders to this Department, he directed us to reduce crime in America. We have heard that challenge, we embrace it, and we intend to meet it.

At the Department of Justice, we understand a key fact: 85 percent of law enforcement officers in America are state and local. They are better trained and more professional than ever. And we know crime in America will never be reduced without our state and local partners. But there is no doubt that federal, state, local, and tribal resources—professionally applied and in accord with scientifically proven policies—can positively impact the crime rate. Just look at our major cities. The New York City Police Department, which has dedicated itself to proactive community-based policing, saw 334 homicides last year. Chicago, while only a third of the size of New York City, logged more than twice as many murders.

Our professionals in the Department have been intensely studying how research based, proven crime reduction techniques to reverse this rise in crime. They have produced a brilliant set of initiatives. I was very pleased with this plan. Whatever the violent crime rate might have been in the next few years, it will be lower if these policies are followed. I can assure you of that. Our aim is not to see how many people we can incarcerate, but by focusing on the most dangerous criminals, to reduce crime and violence.

An effective crime reduction strategy also means starving criminal enterprises of their profits. The Asset Seizure and Forfeiture Program is one of the most effective tools Congress has provided the Department of Justice to fight crime and combat drug cartels and dealers. I know a number of you are concerned about the operation of this program. That

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is why I have established an Asset Forfeiture Accountability director to oversee our forfeiture program and to ensure it operates in an accountable and responsible way.

This Department is committed to protecting the civil and constitutional rights of all individuals and to prosecuting hate crime violence. Every American, regardless of race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation must be safe from violence and criminality.

We will also not shy away from defending the First Amendment rights of every American. We stand ready to enforce federal law, to protect the right to speak and to assemble peacefully, and to defend the free exercise of religion at a time when it is under threat.

We are in the midst of the deadliest drug epidemic this country has ever seen. Higher availability, lower prices, and increasing purity, along with the deadly substance fentanyl, have resulted in climbing death tolls across the country—64,000 last year alone. Many of these deaths resulted from opioid overdoses that began with prescription drug addiction and moved to heroin and fentanyl. There can be no doubt that we need much stricter accountability in the manufacture, prescription, and distribution of addictive opioids. We can delay no longer.

We also know that most of the heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl that is fueling the drug crisis was brought across our southern border by powerful drug cartels, bringing violence, addiction and death. An important factor in our long-term success requires securing our borders.

For decades, the American people have asked for a lawful system of immigration. They are right and just in their demands. We can end the illegality. President Trump has sent an unambiguous message to the world, and the illegal flow has been reduced by as much as half. But there is more to do.

Legislation is essential. President Trump has laid out a reasonable and effective plan with numerous immigration priorities for this body to consider, including a border wall, significant asylum reform, swift border returns, and enhanced interior enforcement. With the progress already achieved, our country is on its way to ending the lawlessness. And—whether it's an end to sanctuary city policies or an e-verification system to ensure lawful employment—they are supported by the vast majority of Americans.

There has been an erosion in the respect for the rule of law. Too often advancing political agendas have been substituted for following the law. This Department of Justice respects Congress and the Constitution, and we intend to enforce the laws as you've written them. The DACA policy produced by the last administration was unlawful and contrary to the laws passed by this institution. Congress is now poised to act on this issue.

The Department is also directing taxpayer dollars toward the overwhelming number of cities and states that cooperate with federal immigration enforcement. Grant funding is not an entitlement; it is an allocation of taxpayer dollars by the Department to advance goals set either by Congress or by the Department. We urge all jurisdictions to end the lawlessness to cooperate with federal immigration officials and stop letting criminal aliens back on their streets to further victimize your communities. It is not right and it makes no sense. We are grateful that overwhelmingly most cities cooperate and to the jurisdictions who have heard this message and are now cooperating.

After 20 years in this body, I understand the importance of being responsive to Congress. We inherited a very significant backlog of unanswered congressional inquiries dating back to 2015 and have already reduced it by half. You can be sure this will remain a priority.

Thank you.

Speaker:

Attorney General Jeff Sessions

Component(s):

Office of the Attorney General