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Gov. Wolf, National Advocates Push for a Fairer Probation System

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf was joined by Deputy Secretary of Corrections Christian Stephens and national criminal justice reform advocates today in the Capitol Rotunda to push for commonsense probation reforms that address probation sentences and probation lengths.

“Despite recent progress, Pennsylvania’s criminal justice system is still failing in some areas,” Gov. Wolf said. “Probation should assist Pennsylvanians with creating stability in their lives and instead, our excessively long sentences and cumbersome rules are causing Pennsylvanians to lose their jobs, employers are losing much-needed workers, families are losing support systems, and taxpayer money is being wasted on a system that is not improving lives or recidivism rates.”

According to the Department of Corrections, one in 35 adults in Pennsylvania is under some form of post-incarceration supervision and that number has increased while the state’s crime rate has decreased. Pennsylvania is one of just eight states where probation can last up to the maximum sentence of an offense.

Gov. Wolf encouraged the end of the practice of forcing Pennsylvanians to spend decades jumping through hoops and putting people into jail for minor probation violations like missing an appointment; to institute hard caps on the length of time a person can be on probation; and to find fitting, productive responses, like connecting people to treatment when they fail drug tests.

“We have the opportunity to positively change the lives of millions of Pennsylvanians through criminal justice reform,” Gov. Wolf said. “And we already have – through bipartisan initiatives like the Clean Slate Law. I’m having some great discussions with members of the legislature on the best next steps, and I’m optimistic that by working together, we can create a fairer criminal justice system that gets Pennsylvanians back on track to productive, successful lives.”

Last year, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections announced its participation in a Safe Streets & Second Chances reentry initiative aimed at reducing recidivism, which aligns with the governor’s criminal justice reform ideals. The DOC has been working with researcher Dr. Carrie Pettus-Davis from Florida State University to provide access to inmates from four state

correctional institutions in western Pennsylvania who were interested in participating in the pilot program.

The 5-Key Model used in the Safe Streets & Second Chances model is a departure from some reentry models that are predominantly deficits-focused. This model focuses on the strengths and psychological well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals to ensure they will remain crime-free and contribute positively to society. Research indicates that a focus on strengths and well-being best maximizes public health and public safety.

In addition to Dr. Pettus-Davis, Gov. Wolf was joined by Safe Streets & Second Chances Advisory Council Chair Mark Holden, Right on Crime's John Koufos, Sen. Anthony Williams, Rep. Jordan Harris, and other legislators and criminal justice reform advocates.

"We need an effective criminal justice system which protects people, preserves public safety, respects human dignity, and removes barriers to opportunity for people reentering society to have real second chances," Mark Holden said. "The research of Safe Streets & Second Chances has found that we get better outcomes when we work together for bipartisan solutions to critical problems like housing, employment and probation reform in Pennsylvania. We look forward to working with Governor Wolf, the legislature and all constituencies to ensure that commonsense smart-on-crime and soft-on-taxpayer policy solutions are achieved for the Keystone state."

"Probation reform and smart criminal justice reform consistently lead to safer communities, and we are excited to see bipartisan innovation in Pennsylvania," said John Koufos. "Our partners look forward to working with the legislature as they release a probation bill before this session expires that will make Pennsylvania safer and more prosperous. Technical probation violations have been estimated to cost Pennsylvania taxpayers \$100 million per year but are not making Pennsylvanians any safer. Pennsylvania is charting a new course by fixing this system, and we thank the legislature and the governor for working together on this critical issue."

"There are positive, commonsense changes that we can make to the probation system to balance the needs of those who have served time and are working to be part of our society again with the needs of our community and victims to be kept safe," Rep. Sheryl Delozier, legislation co-sponsor, said.

"Criminal justice reform is the civil rights issue of our time, and it's an honor to stand with Governor Wolf whose support is invaluable," legislation co-sponsor Rep. Jordan Harris said. "Our probation system is broken and rather than helping people get back to leading a productive life, it's entrapping them like quicksand. I'm confident we can bring about real change for Pennsylvania and I look forward to continuing to work with Representative Sheryl Delozier as well as democrats and republicans across the aisle who recognize that probation reform is necessary to move Pennsylvania forward."

"At the end of the day, our role as elected officials is to make life better for the people of the commonwealth and that means providing more opportunity, less government, and safer neighborhoods," said Sen. Camera Bartolotta, legislation co-sponsor. "Criminal justice reform helps achieve all three of these goals. That is why I am proud to be a prime sponsor of Senate Bill 14, legislation that will help reform our overly burdensome probation system from one that too often traps people in a cycle of incarceration, to one that offers opportunity and a path to a better life."

“We’ve worked for over a year with partners representing a wide array of ideologies in support of achieving long overdue reform to our community supervision system,” legislation co-sponsor Sen. Anthony Williams said. “I look forward to continuing that work and getting a bill that ensures equitable and fair probation supervision to Governor Wolf’s desk early next year.”

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