

ATTACHMENT A

DANIELLE FRIEL OTTEN, MEMBER
155TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

102B EAST WING
P.O. BOX 202155
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA 17120-2155
(717) 783-5009
FAX: (717) 772-2943

631 POTTSTOWN PIKE
EXTON, PENNSYLVANIA 19341
(484) 200-8259
FAX: (484) 200-8269



House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

COMMITTEES

AGING AND OLDER ADULT SERVICES
ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES AND ENERGY
HUMAN SERVICES

October 26, 2022

The Honorable John Lawrence
Chairman, Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order
211 Ryan Office Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Chairman Lawrence,

This letter is in response to the Second Interim Report of the Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order, received October 24, 2022.

The Select Committee was established to investigate, review, and make findings and recommendations concerning “[t]he rising rates of crime, including, but not limited to, the enforcement and prosecution of violent crime and offenses involving the illegal possession of firearms, in the City of Philadelphia.”

To date, this committee has focused exclusively on what happens **after** a violent crime has been committed (i.e., the law enforcement, prosecution, and punishment), with little to no analysis of the exacerbating factors that have contributed to the rise of gun violence or other violent crime in the city. If the Committee is truly interested in the restoration of law and order, I respectfully submit that its members should be at least as concerned with prevention as with prosecution. To focus solely on law enforcement without working to understand and alleviate the underlying causes of the rising rates of crime is legislative malpractice.

Trauma-informed practice instructs us to recognize the symptoms of trauma and its effects on individuals and communities; integrate knowledge about trauma and recovery into our policies; and work to actively prevent re-traumatization. Instead of focusing solely on, “What’s wrong with Philadelphia?” we should be asking, “What happened to Philadelphia to put them on this path?” And what happened to Philadelphia is a half century of structural racism in the form of some of the worst redlining policies in the nation, followed by **decades** of failure by the Pennsylvania legislature to invest in this city.

From state budgets that have failed to invest in Philadelphia’s public schools to state laws that have allowed the proliferation of guns on city streets and prohibited the city from enacting its own stricter firearm regulations, our state legislature owns more than a small share of the blame for the city’s current crisis and must now work to acknowledge and correct its root causes.

Our failure to invest in education, literacy, and enrichment for generations of Philadelphia students has resulted in a city where only 32 percent of third graders are reading at grade level

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and an estimated 22 percent of adults lack basic literacy skills. The role of illiteracy in crime and aggression cannot be dismissed or ignored. A study of incarcerated individuals in Texas found that 48 percent were likely dyslexic, and more than two-thirds struggled with basic reading comprehension. Nationwide, 85 percent of all juveniles who become involved with the juvenile justice system are functionally low-literate. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime and 63 percent more likely to be incarcerated than their peers with four-year college degrees.

Not only in Philadelphia, but across the Commonwealth, we see increases in crime rates wherever poverty gains a foothold. Doubling down on law enforcement while continuing to neglect the upstream causes of the rise in crime not only fails to solve the problem; it dooms us to repeat a cycle of crime and mass incarceration.

What we are experiencing in Philadelphia is the product of our chronic lack of investment in community-building solutions like pre-school, childcare, after-school programs, and recreation, combined with decades of policies designed to encourage the proliferation of guns.

Dozens of legislative proposals currently awaiting action in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives seek to reduce gun violence through broadly popular common-sense measures such as:

- better regulation of ghost-guns, 3D-printed guns, and undetectable guns;
- taking steps to prevent illegal firearm trafficking;
- closing background-check loopholes;
- enacting penalties for failure to report lost or stolen guns;
- empowering local governments to protect their residents from gun violence; and
- identifying the root causes and exacerbating factors of gun violence by requiring the collection and public reporting of specific, standardized details around every gun-related incident—similar to the way that auto accident data is collected and reported—so that we can recommend smart, data-driven legislative solutions that most effectively address the problem.

But the majority party in Harrisburg has steadfastly refused to bring gun safety legislation up for consideration in committee or on the House floor and continues to preempt Philadelphia from enacting its own stricter gun regulations. Less than one year ago, despite opposition from the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association and the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association, Republicans passed a concealed-carry bill, ultimately vetoed by Governor Wolf, that would have led to **more** guns on the streets of Philadelphia and elsewhere in the commonwealth.

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On the law enforcement side of the equation, the state should be supporting Philadelphia in its requests for investments in technology and training to help our police departments make lawful arrests and help our prosecutors achieve higher conviction rates in violent crime cases. Modern forensic technology would give Philadelphia law enforcement agencies the tools they need to capture DNA evidence and identify subjects, and enhanced training would ensure that arrests are not thrown out in court for illegal search, seizure, or other civil rights violations. We need investments in our court system to ensure that cases are brought to trial quickly and efficiently and to support witnesses and surviving victims, both for their own protection and to better secure the public's help in bringing criminals to justice.

As someone born and raised in Philadelphia who still has a great love for this city, I'm so glad to see the Republican party finally valuing the lives of Philadelphians and acknowledging the enormous significance of Philadelphia as an economic engine for our commonwealth. But instead of perpetuating and reinforcing a stigma against Philadelphia, we should be striving to lift up and build on its strengths—its unmatched resilience, sense of community, and legacy as a center for arts, culture, higher education, innovation, medicine, and history.

If the Select Committee is genuinely concerned for the safety and wellbeing of Philadelphians, then I urge you to acknowledge the deficiencies in the scope of your investigation, demonstrate your commitment to addressing the full breadth of the problem, and work toward solutions that will actually address the root causes of crime and violence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Danielle Friel Otten".

Danielle Friel Otten
State Representative
155th Legislative District

Cc: Rep. Torren Ecker, Member, Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order
Rep. Wendi Thomas, Member, Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order
Rep. Amen Brown, Member, Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order
Rep. Danilo Burgos, Member, Select Committee on Restoring Law and Order
Rep. Joanna McClinton, House Minority Leader
Rep. Jordan Harris, House Minority Whip
Rep. Matt Bradford, Minority Chair, House Appropriations Committee