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NEWS RELEASE

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Ramsey & Hennepin County law enforcement and prosecution leaders convene to explore measures to improve public safety and reduce unnecessary incarceration

National law enforcement group offers tangible ideas on reducing crime and incarceration

Saint Paul, MN – Nearly 100 law enforcement and prosecution officials from Ramsey and Hennepin Counties convened for a leadership conference to discuss ideas on how to achieve better public safety outcomes for our residents in Ramsey and Hennepin counties.

Ronal Serpas, former New Orleans police chief and director of Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration, in his keynote presentation, put forward his vision of improving public safety for communities, which includes law enforcement and prosecution reducing its reliance on incarceration when other alternative measures may be more effective. His message included a focus on creating alternatives to arrest and prosecution, reforming laws that impose overly harsh mandatory minimum sentences, restoring balance to criminal laws and sanctions that may no longer be supported by the public, strengthening community policing efforts, and focusing precious police and prosecution resources on tackling violent crime and solving them through greater community participation and trust.

After hearing Mr. Serpas, law enforcement and prosecution leaders broke out by county and engaged in a facilitated dialogue led by Sheriff Rich Stanek in Hennepin and Chief Todd Axtell in Ramsey and supported by each respective agency head. Police officers and prosecutors offered their candid thoughts, identified existing initiatives that are working and offered a number of new ideas for further exploration and collaboration.

Everyone who voiced their thoughts agreed that law enforcement and prosecution should be doing everything possible to ensure that what we do actually leads to better public safety outcomes for our public and that alternative approaches to arrest, jail and/or prison that are effective should be implemented, especially in the area of mental health and drug addiction.

“For a long time now, I have believed that there are better and more effective ways to achieve safer and healthier communities that could be achieved if we thought differently and more creatively about our current criminal justice system and recognize its limitations in delivering what the public wants and needs.” said Ramsey County Attorney John Choi. “While we all have been implementing innovative changes, this first convening of law enforcement and prosecution leaders in Minnesota’s two largest counties to coalesce around the vision of reducing crime and incarceration at the same time is an important step forward to a better and more effective criminal justice system.”

Drawing on his experience as a chief of a major metropolitan area, Ronal Serpas laid out a reform vision that included law enforcement, prosecutors and the larger community. “To effect meaningful change, we need to work with community members, police and prosecutors to reduce crime, protect communities, and

ensure justice.” Serpas said. “We need to better understand our community values by encouraging law enforcement and prosecutors to work within communities to encourage open dialogue on how best to serve neighborhoods and keep our streets safe.”

The core of the Law Enforcement Leaders reform process centers around three key areas:

1. Create alternatives to arrest and incarceration, particularly for substance abusers and the mentally ill, who make up disproportionate numbers of those behind bars and frustratingly disproportionate numbers of recidivists. More incarceration does not keep our communities safe. Good crime-control policy is not about locking up everyone. It's about locking up the right people and providing appropriate and meaningful referrals for those with a treatment need.
2. Reduce or eliminate overly severe sentencing laws. This involves reclassifying some low level, nonviolent felonies as misdemeanors and taking other minor crimes off the books. It also includes a closer look at reforming mandatory-minimum sentences and giving judges more discretion to craft punishments to individual circumstances. With such steps, police and prosecutors can hold people accountable for breaking the law in a more fair and effective way. With proportional sentences, we can reduce both sentence lengths and the possibility of repeat crimes, breaking the cycle of incarceration for low-level offenders, and focus our resources on individuals who have committed serious and violent crimes.
3. Engage community members to enable police and prosecutors to effectively reduce crime, protect communities, and ensure justice. Law Enforcement Leaders support agency practice changes to strengthen community relations. We support police departments' collaboration with neighborhood residents in developing policies that identify community problems and implement solutions to produce meaningful results.

“This is the perfect time to discuss the issues that Ronal Serpas and his organization have brought forward,” Freeman said. “Twenty years ago, the crime rate was so high all anyone wanted to talk about was locking people up. Today, crime has plummeted and we can talk about smart policing and prosecuting. Here in Minnesota, we have started to take action. In 2016, police and prosecutors worked to change drug sentencing, requiring more marijuana before anyone was sent to prison and reserving those beds for drug kingpins. In Hennepin County, we are not taking juveniles to court for curfew violations, but working with them and their parents to end their late nights. And for other crimes, we diverted one-third of juveniles last year out of court and into alternatives. There are many other great ideas out there and we look forward to implementing the best ones.”

Ramsey and Hennepin County leaders broke into separate groups to brainstorm and discuss a list of initiatives accomplished or in process that reduce or mitigate detention, jail or prison in their respective communities. With leaders from law enforcement, municipal and county prosecutors, the conversations were both inclusive and insightful.

“As Sheriff, I have long said that we cannot criminalize mental illness, yet despite our best efforts county jails continue to serve as warehouses for mentally ill, low-level, non-violent offenders,” said Hennepin County Sheriff Rich Stanek. “Conversations such as the one today help to move the criminal justice

system forward to ensure we provide our community members with the public safety resources they need and deserve.”

Programs in progress to address need for community alternatives:

- Hennepin County adult detention initiative has reduced the number of detentions due to bench warrants that now are set as sign and release warrants.
- Minneapolis Police Department’s co-responder model for mental health calls have shown early success. Public is asking for this as a way to avoid jail if treatment is a possibility.
- Redwing Project – Officers visit and interact with kids servicing their sentences to build relationships and better pathways going forward.
- Increase number of and expand the capabilities of downtown Minneapolis livability ambassadors.
- 1800 Chicago – Provides direct care for community as well as triage for alternatives to jail. Provides alternative for law enforcement to jail.
- Integrated access team within jail – social workers on site for real time treatment as well as post jail follow-up. Ramsey County added four mental health provider positions in the Adult Detention Center for this purpose.
- Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative has made great strides in reducing the number of juveniles in the criminal justice system, but racial disparities persist and must be dealt with.
- Ramsey County warrant resolution events are community located and properly resourced with advocacy partners help many folks resolve outstanding issues and stay out of jail.
- Hennepin County conducted a one-day snapshot to better understand the prevalence of mental health indicators among inmates in jail.
- Partnership with Hennepin Healthcare nurses to conduct health screenings and identify mental health acuity of all inmates during booking process.
- Need for housing, mental health and probation services.
- Create a drop center for those in crisis vs. jail.
- The Ramsey County Sheriff’s Office, Community Corrections and the 2nd Judicial Court will implement the Diversified Alternative to Detention Initiative in 2019 with the goal of reducing the detention of non-violent misdemeanor offenders.

“The issues of reducing crime and incarceration requires us all as a community to think differently,” said Ramsey County Sheriff Jack Serier. “These are ‘we’ issues as communities which need our attention and I ask all of us to think about alternatives and resources we are willing to commit to getting better outcomes for ourselves and the communities in which we live.”

Note: Contact Dennis Gerhardstein for additional information.