



CHESTER COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

TELEPHONE: 610-344-6801
FAX: 610-344-5905

THOMAS P. HOGAN
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

201 W. MARKET STREET, SUITE 4450
POST OFFICE BOX 2746
WEST CHESTER, PA 19380-0991

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PRESS RELEASE

Zero Homicides in Chester County

Nobody was murdered in Chester County yesterday. Why is this news? Because nobody was murdered in Chester County the day before that, or the day before that, or the day before that. In fact, Chester County has not recorded a single homicide to date in 2019.

Chester County District Attorney Tom Hogan stated, "Every year, our goal is zero homicides. We know that is a virtually unattainable goal, with over 500,000 people living in Chester County. But we have clearly defined programs to reduce violence and consider every life saved to be a victory. This year, our long-term efforts have yielded exceptional results."

So what is the secret? And can it be shared with Philadelphia, where there has been a continuing trend of rising homicide rates?

Any experienced District Attorney can tell you that the majority of homicides fall into two main categories: (1) domestic homicides, usually where a man is killing a woman; and (2) drug-related homicides, where criminals in the drug game (who are almost always armed) are shooting rivals over money, turf, girls, old feuds, or just disrespect. Using this information, the Chester County District Attorney's Office (the "DAO") has worked with Chester County law

enforcement and the Domestic Violence Center of Chester County specifically to target these two categories, seeking to drive down the homicide rate.¹

For potential domestic homicides, Chester County is one of the leading counties in Pennsylvania for implementation of the Lethality Assessment Program, better known as LAP. Under the LAP guidelines, officers who respond to a domestic assault ask a series of simple questions to the victim. Does the defendant own a gun? Has the defendant ever choked you? Do you have a child that does not belong to the defendant? These and a few other basic questions have proven to be statistically significant in predicting future extreme violence, such as murders. The police use this information to advise the victim of the risk level, provide bail information to a judge, and take other appropriate steps.

The LAP guidelines are a national model. However, based on hard-earned experience, the Chester County DAO and Domestic Violence Center are requesting that the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (“PCCD”) add another question to LAP: “Are you contemplating or in the process of separating from your partner, and if so, are they aware of it?” Historically, in cases like James Hvizda and Gregory Twyman, Chester County has seen domestic homicides when a woman finally decides to break it off with a man, with divorce or one party moving out often a trigger. In Hvizda, the victim had moved out and filed for divorce. In Twyman’s case, the victim had literally packed the defendant’s clothes and left them on the porch to force him to move out on the day that he killed her. The Chester County DAO reviewed the LAP questions with criminology professors from the University of Pennsylvania, who confirmed the statistical significance of such a question. Chester County is hopeful that the addition of this common-sense question will help police and prosecutors around the nation.

Dolly Wideman-Scott, the Director of the Domestic Violence Center of Chester County, added, “October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, so we are ecstatic to announce during this special month zero homicides in Chester County for the year. By partnering with the District Attorney’s Office and our local police, we are seeing the Lethality Assessment Program making a real difference. And we are always trying to improve how LAP works and how we deliver services.”

Using the LAP guidelines, Chester County police have cut down on domestic homicides, saving lives. But the second part of the homicide puzzle is to

¹ Chester County averages about 10-15 homicides per year.

reduce drug-related homicides. Drug-related homicides include drug dealers shooting each other over turf battles or in drug-related robberies. However, drug-related murders are a much broader category. Simply put, drug dealers are often armed young men with anger and impulse-control problems. Thus, a drug-related homicide may be a drug dealer who has merely been verbally insulted by another drug dealer on the street, leading to a killing.

The Chester County DAO and Chester County law enforcement have taken a multi-tiered approach to reducing drug-related violence. First, for the second summer in a row, the Coatesville Police Department and the Chester County DAO unleashed Operation Silent Night in Coatesville. And for the second summer in a row, there were no homicides in Coatesville, an unprecedented period of calm in recent history and a building point for the revitalization of the city.

Operation Silent Night targets drug dealers with a history of violence, using both long-term investigations and short-term patrol tactics, like flooding a “hot spot” area with uniformed officers on Friday and Saturday nights. Operation Silent Night also includes multiple other components, such as the police rewarding good behavior with public recognition and frequent community contact. One of the most effective elements of Operation Silent Night is that it is no secret. The criminals know that it is running (although they often can’t get the name right, calling it things like “Operation Night Owl” and “Operation Quiet”), and they change their behavior because of it.

Operation Silent Night also has been significant because it produces information and cooperation. The information generated helps to solve murders and shootings. The problem with one drug-related murder that goes unsolved is that it often leads to other murders, in what prosecutors call the “ping-pong effect.” For example, Drug Dealer A from Crew Blue is shot and killed by a member of Crew Red. If the police cannot solve that murder and make an arrest, Crew Blue is likely to take things into their own hands and kill somebody from Crew Red in retaliation. Crew Red then comes back to kill somebody in Crew Blue, and the cycle continues. Coatesville last witnessed such “ping-pong” murders when a drug crew led by Duron “Gotti” Peoples clashed with another crew led by Jonas “Sonny Hill” Suber. A combination of local police and federal agencies eventually quelled the violence with targeted operations, but not before Suber and multiple other young men were killed or shot. Peoples is serving a life sentence for murder. Philadelphia is currently facing a similar surge in murders, partly fueled by the “ping-pong effect.”

From a broader perspective, the Chester County DAO works with local police and federal agencies to take down large-scale drug dealers, who also can bring significant violence and gang-related activity to an area. The DAO created a fully integrated Drug Unit of prosecutors and detectives seven years ago. During that time, the DAO Drug Unit has taken out multiple large-scale drug traffickers, some with direct ties to Mexican cartels, some with connections through different states, and others with contacts in areas like Philadelphia and Reading. At this point, intelligence directly from arrested drug dealers is that the word has gotten out in the region to avoid Chester County. This is good news for the good citizens of this county.

“Reducing violence requires long-term planning and coordination of agencies,” stated Coatesville Police Chief Jack Laufer. “The Coatesville Police Department is glad to be at the forefront of crime-reduction strategies like Operation Silent Night and the Lethality Assessment Program. Every dollar and hour that we invest in programs like these pays long-term dividends for the safety of our community.”

While Chester County sits at zero homicides, Philadelphia has experienced over 260 homicides to date in 2019, and is on track to surpass their 2018 total of 353 homicides. Homicides in Philadelphia have been rising since 2016, even as other large cities have seen reduced or steady homicide rates.

So the question is whether programs like LAP and Operation Silent Night could work for Philadelphia. These programs take planning, coordination, and significant resources. There are serious demographic differences between Philadelphia and Chester County, such as population and wealth, but Philadelphia also has over 6,000 police officers and the assistance of numerous federal agencies, compared to the approximately 800 police officers in Chester County. From a sheer cost perspective, the Chester County programs are not cheap, requiring at least \$200,000 per year when factoring in costs like training, equipment, and overtime. However, the “all-in” costs of a single homicide, including such factors as investigation and incarceration, have been estimated at over \$17 million. Thus, the economic benefits seem straightforward. And then, of course, there is the simple but incalculable value of saving a human life. Simply put, Philadelphia should give some of these programs a try.

Chester County does not discount good luck in our statistical good fortune. When there were no homicides in Coatesville in the summer of 2018, many people pointed to the rainy weather, especially on weekends. But when 2019 brought a

long, hot summer, the Coatesville homicide rate stayed at zero. Improved community policing and an outstanding trauma center at Paoli Hospital also play a role. And we realize and prepare for the potential for another homicide happening on any given day.

District Attorney Hogan added, “Whether Chester County law enforcement is lucky or good, the citizens of the County get the benefits either way. We have worked long and hard to make Chester County a great place to live, work, and raise a family. We wish the same good fortune on every other county in the region and always stand ready to help.”

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Approved for release:

Thomas P. Hogan