



The Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence and the Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology

Protecting the Homeland: An Examination of Federal Efforts to Support State and Local Law Enforcement


Testimony of Odessa (Texas) Police Chief Michael Gerke

Distinguished Members of the Committee, the reason for the existence of law enforcement agencies is to make the lives of the citizens that they serve better. It is my belief that the main goal of local law enforcement the accomplish this endeavor is the reduction of violent crime. These crimes have the most significant effect on their victims. To this end approximately 2 and a half years ago the Odessa Police Department entered a partnership with the United States Attorney's Office for the Western District of Texas for the priority prosecution of those individuals apprehended in our community who were convicted felons, narcotics dealers, and criminal gang members. This led not only to a reduction of violent crime in the area, but also to the reduction of property crimes such as auto thefts and burglaries.

This is a shining example of what partnerships between the local and Federal authorities can accomplish. We continue to have a very strong relationship with the Assistant United States Attorney assigned to our area and view her as one of the most trusted and valued members of our team. It is very important to have these relationships as we move into the future with the challenges that we currently face.

The most persistent challenge does not involve crime per se. It involves the resources needed to fight crime, namely personnel. Like many law enforcement agencies across America, the Odessa Police Department is significantly short of Police Officers. We have an authorized strength of 181 and are currently 38 Officers short. In Odessa, which is in the Permian Basin, which is one of the world's leading

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oil and gas producing areas, high school graduates often do not see the value of education after the high school level. This is because they can move to employment in the petroleum industry that pays more than a career in law enforcement. In Texas, individuals cannot be employed as Police Officers until they are 21 years of age and many times the three years after high school leads them to different career paths or down paths that no longer allow them to be in law enforcement.

The Social Harm perspective looks at those issues in a community that cause the greatest social harm. Undoubtedly the cause of the greatest social harm in Odessa and the surrounding area currently is sale and ingestion of Fentanyl by our citizens. This has led to countless overdoses and many deaths. Officers and paramedics routinely respond to these calls and many times administer an antidote such as Narcan. While this product and others like it are effective, it is getting more difficult to acquire an adequate supply for the needs of first responders.

As we all know, the difference in Fentanyl and other abused narcotics such as cocaine or methamphetamines is the drastically higher lethality rate for Fentanyl. Also, Fentanyl has been introduced to much of the population in a surreptitious manner. Many times, individuals believe that they are ingesting one substance and unwittingly ingesting Fentanyl as it has been added to the original substance or been made to look like a substance that it is not. In Odessa, the predominate form of Fentanyl that we see is in the form of counterfeit M-30 pills (oxycodone). Because of the lethality of Fentanyl, we treat the selling of it as a violent crime. When we identify a supplier, removing that individual and their supply of illegal narcotics from our community becomes a very high priority.

With this being said, the most predominate illegal narcotic used in Odessa and the surrounding area is methamphetamine. Large quantities of this substance are seized each year. Users commit crimes ranging from robbery to theft to procure property or cash that can be traded for the substance.

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In the fight against violent crime and illegal narcotics as with most endeavors, information is power and is essential. To this point it is necessary to share information amongst all levels of law enforcement. This allows for efficiencies which has become much more necessary due to the shortage of law enforcement personnel. This sharing of information requires two things. First that it be collected and second that relationships exist between agencies that facilitate the passage of information.

The collection of important information is made more difficult by the reduced number of law enforcement officers. However, this gap can be filled to some extent with technology. Many larger agencies have had automatic license plate readers (ALPR), video cameras, advanced analytical software, and forensic equipment for some time. The acquisition of these technologies has been difficult for smaller departments because of the lack of funding. These departments must educate themselves with knowledge about Federal and State grant opportunities and other funding avenues. The Odessa Police Department has found ALPRs particularly effective in helping to identify vehicles driven by suspects of crime. We have also found that purchasing the equipment necessary to join the National Integrated Ballistic Imaging Network and joining the network with the coordination of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms to be essential in solving and linking firearms related crime.

Creating relationships that facilitate the sharing of information is accomplished easiest at the local level. The Odessa Police Department and the Midland Police Department (our nearest neighbor) have created the ability for the officers of each respective department to view on demand, the report information from the other. These departments have also created a local task force that focuses on removing violent criminals and narcotics from both communities. We have created a radio network in Ector County (the county in which Odessa resides) that every agency in the county uses. Most Federal and State agencies also have access to this network. Soon, this network will expand to encompass a new radio network in Midland County.





Relationship building is most difficult when dealing with Federal agencies. This difficulty, at least in our area, is caused by the almost constant turnover of personnel in these agencies. In the past this would not be as big of an issue because most departments had officers stationed with the Federal agencies as task force officers. The number of task force officers has declined because many departments are recalling their officers to fill vacancies.

It is essential that more and better cooperation between all levels of law enforcement happen and that proper outcomes be identified. Numbers of arrests and amounts of seizures do not matter nearly as much as lowering the number of crime victims. We can only accomplish these reductions if we all work together. Remember, egos and attitudes are the enemy of progress.

