

Good afternoon. Thank you: Chairperson Rowe, Representative Gaydos, and members of the Pennsylvania House Republican Policy Committee for inviting me to participate in today's hearing.

As a member of the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association, I appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective on second degree felony murder sentencing and the consequences that continued inaction will have on victims' families and on the safety of communities across the Commonwealth.

For those who may not know me – I am the District Attorney of Westmoreland County – currently serving in my second term. I oversee an office of two dozen attorneys, 14 county detectives, legal secretaries, and a handful of victim witness advocates.

As district attorney, it is our duty to not only protect and preserve public safety, but to be the voice for victims of crime who have often been harmed, hurt, and traumatized. It is these victims who carry the burden and the trauma from the crimes committed upon them and it is our duty, as prosecutors, to vigorously fight for justice and hold offenders accountable.

One of the most important, yet most difficult, responsibilities of being a prosecutor is helping families who have endured the unimaginable loss of a loved one to murder and understanding how offenders will be held accountable.

They ask: Will the person who killed my family member go to prison? For how long? Could they be released someday? Will my family and community be safe? These are not abstract questions. They are the foundation of victims' sense of justice and security.

It is disheartening and disappointing that a deadline passed without any clarity or measures in place to provide framework and guidelines for judges when sentencing some of the most egregious offenders.

The Senate passed legislation to fix mandatory minimums to ensure criminals remain incarcerated – instead, the House narrowly passed a watered-down version that comes as an injustice to victims and their families.

These are offenders who committed violent, heinous crimes and by giving the opportunity to petition for release, it greatly jeopardizes every aspect of public safety. It is also a disservice to the justice system and taxpayers in the Commonwealth who will be forced to foot the bill for ongoing court proceedings if 1,100 inmates should be considered for resentencing or possible release.

Failing to act on a legislative framework for second-degree murder is a failure for the victims and their families who entrust our government to hold violent offenders accountable and uphold law and order.

As an example, in Westmoreland County: The sentencing of a defendant who was convicted of second-degree murder is currently hanging in the balance of legislation to address the supreme court's decision in Commonwealth vs. Lee.

The defendant is scheduled to be sentenced on Monday, instead our prosecutors are preparing for the unknown. If the judge decides to use his own discretion in sentencing the defendant, it could prompt appeals from either side for an unconstitutional resolution without legislative framework and a sentencing scheme in place.

Letresse Williams was convicted by a Westmoreland County jury in December of 2025 for killing and attempting to rob another man in New Kensington who he believed carried a large sum of cash and drugs. The victim was found shot to death with multiple gunshot wounds inside of his vehicle in an abandoned housing complex.

The victim, Anthone Williams, was 31. He was a father to five young children. The victim's family waited five long years for that verdict, and they are still waiting for justice as Williams' resentencing remains on the table – waiting for direction from the legislative body.

At the very least, these families who have been tormented by crime and trauma are at least owed some clarity and uniformity when it comes to the courts.

Not only should senate bill 1400 be brought to a vote – the final bill should include the following:

- Expressly preserve crime victims' statutory right to participate in the parole process for these cases, and;
- Explicitly protect the finality of existing plea agreements to second-degree murder, many of which were negotiated specifically to take the death penalty off the table, with the understanding of all parties that the resolution was final.

An inaction on this bill will be detrimental to the safety of our community, to the victims, and to the integrity of the criminal justice system.

Prospectively, it is my belief that a penalty for second-degree murder should include a mandatory minimum and a life without parole maximum. While it is vital that judges maintain discretion in sentencing, the most violent offenders should be sentenced to life when the circumstances of the case call for it.

Retroactively, the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole should be allowed additional time to act on or reconsider cases that would be eligible for parole. Each case file will need to be individually reviewed -- and given the statewide volume, it will be time-consuming and taxing on the system.

Thank you for the invitation to speak before the committee today. I hope this brings some understanding and insight into how critical this piece of legislation can be to upholding justice, protecting victims, and defending the integrity of the criminal justice system while also preserving public safety. Thank you.