

# District Attorney

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### Protecting the Citizens of Snyder County



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As the district attorney in Snyder County, prosecuting both youth and adults, my mission is to protect the county's citizens by holding people accountable for violating the law but also treating the root causes of their involvement in the justice system—a long-term solution to increase community well-being and safety. I recognize that many people involved in the justice system need treatment and other interventions but will not seek them out on their own; however, by utilizing diversion programs, working closely with our adult probation department, and reducing lengthy sentences, I can give them the incentive to engage in programming, with the hopes of avoiding future illegal behavior.

**Diversionary Programs.** It is critical that district attorneys embrace diversionary solutions to prosecution. Snyder County regularly utilizes three such programs. The Youth Accountability Program

recruits members of the community to serve on a panel. They meet with youth who, after being assessed using the Youth Level of Service (YSL) tool, are considered to be at low risk of recidivism. A contract is created between the youth and the panel that aims to hold the youth accountable for their actions and reestablish a sense of community, all while reducing the chance of recidivism. This program reduces time spent in court prosecuting these cases, avoids mixing populations who are low and high risk, and keeps youth off probation supervision, allowing the county to allocate resources elsewhere. Since 2010, 101 youth have been involved in the program, with 96 successfully completing it.

Drug treatment court was implemented in 2007 and has received state accreditation by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. Snyder County and Union County partner in this program. A substantial portion of my docket has substance use issues, and I see drug treatment court as the highest level of services that our probation department provides. Family members have expressed appreciation at the changes they see in their loved ones who have participated in the program, and they have noted that they can again sleep at night. When a person succeeds in drug treatment court, we literally applaud their success. Some have never received this sort of praise, so it's a retraining of their brain and patterns of thinking. The recidivism rate for drug treatment court in Snyder County is under 10%. That's a win-win for the individual and for community well-being and safety.

In early 2022, Snyder County was the 13th Pennsylvania county to join the Law Enforcement Treatment Initiative (LETI). LETI diverts from the justice system people at low risk of recidivism who have substance use issues but who do not need the structure or dosage of community supervision or

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drug treatment court. Instead of prosecution, LETI incentivizes people to complete a drug and alcohol assessment and then helps connect them to treatment. Snyder County has partnered with the United Way on this initiative and plans to embed social workers in the justice system. LETI is still in its infancy in Snyder County, but it has already seen positive outcomes, and it has allowed us to focus our limited resources on the people who most need our assistance.

**“Warehousing” People.** At this time, the Snyder County Prison has limited services to offer people in prison. Some would describe our county prison as a “warehouse.” Incarcerating a person keeps the community safer for as long as the person is in jail but, with limited services, it does nothing to improve the person’s long-term outcomes or their quality of life upon release. For those instances when incarceration is mandated, we are increasingly using the option of house arrest instead of prison. This allows people to get much-needed services while still serving their sentence. A large proportion of our prison population is “home-grown”: they are part of our community, our neighbors. We have a responsibility to address the issues that brought them into the justice system and to help them succeed.

**Working with Probation.** As the district attorney, I have a good relationship with the adult probation department. I trust their judgment, especially when it comes to approving a request for early termination from supervision. For many people, long periods of supervision do little for public safety and often lead to minor technical violations. Of course, we have to be mindful of victims, but if people have had programming and

have learned skills to address their needs, early release reduces the strain on the courts and adult probation department, allowing both to spend more time and resources on people who would benefit from the added support.

**The Future.** We as district attorneys can improve how we seek justice. Seeking justice is not just securing a conviction but also making an impact on the community we serve. We need to use discretion and identify long-term solutions. We need to recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for everyone and that jail does not address the root causes of people’s illegal behavior. Diversion, house arrest with services, and early release upon completion of programming are some options we can consider—not because considering those options feels good but because, used in the right circumstances, they work.