

2024 NJSBA Fall Conference

Quality of Life Crimes – Prosecution and Prevention

This program focuses on pre-emptive and reactive approaches to quality-of-life crimes, generally referred to as those non-violent offenses that have the capacity to deteriorate a community. The impact is wide-ranging. First, these offenses lead residents to feel unsafe and their communities devalued. Second, they discourage business and tourism, which impacts local economies. Third, these acts and the environments they create are often precursors to violence. With that in mind, the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office and Atlantic City Police Department will share their experiences policing, prosecuting and preventing these crimes and their impact through innovative programming in courts and empathetic outreach on the streets and Boardwalk of Atlantic City.

Moderator:

Prosecutor, William E. Reynolds

Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office

Speakers:

Executive Assistant Prosecutor Rick E. McKelvey

Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office

Chief Assistant Prosecutor Kathleen E. Robinson

Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office

Officer Daniel Kramer

Atlantic City Police Department

Michael Kane

Director of Security, Caesars Atlantic City Hotel and Casino



Public Health is Public Safety: A Call to Action on Homelessness in Atlantic City

As the Atlantic County Prosecutor for the past 27 months, I have had the unique opportunity to witness firsthand the challenges faced by the homeless and at-risk populations in Atlantic County in general and Atlantic City in particular. This role has taken me beyond the courtroom and into the streets and under the boardwalk –quite literally. Along with representatives from our office, I have attended over 59 outreach events, often at 6 a.m., to meet these individuals under and around the famed Atlantic City boardwalk. Additionally, I have participated in more than 118 plus meetings with various stakeholders who share the common goal of addressing this urgent issue.

One thing has become crystal clear during this time: the homeless and at-risk populations are the most vulnerable members of our community. They are victims of crime. They are witnesses to crime. In many cases, they find themselves committing crimes simply to survive. While many are lower-level, quality-of-life offenses, the influences of substance abuse and mental illness also lead to violence. Homeless victims and witnesses are nearly impossible to connect with, which impedes the prosecution of serious cases and our efforts to seek justice against offenders. Homeless defendants rarely attend court voluntarily and are often unable to comply with treatment plans and other conditions of release or probation, leading to more warrants and more incarceration which burdens defendants, courts, law enforcement and jails. The inevitable result is more crime, which is a danger to residents and a burden on us all.

Currently, the homeless population in Atlantic City reflects a revolving door of approximately 250 individuals. To many, they are invisible. People walk by and ignore them and act as if they do not exist. As a society and a community, we are failing by ignoring their most basic human needs.

Whether their struggle is with addiction, mental health, or poverty, those affected need stability—both in their lives and in their environments. The first step in providing that stability is offering transitional housing, followed by access to temporary housing. These are not

luxuries; they are essential tools in the fight to restore dignity and hope to people who have none.

For years, stakeholders have failed to adequately address this issue. This is a systemic problem that mirrors similar struggles in cities across the country. In the post-COVID world, the crisis has only deepened.

Key organizations have been unable to make sufficient progress. The Atlantic City Rescue Mission, for example, has capacity for 300 beds, but it has been continually reported to all the stakeholders that only 30 to 50 of the beds are usable due to the facility's conditions and operational failures. Similarly, it has also been continually reported to the stakeholders that the Atlantic City Housing Authority has over 130 units that have been and remain uninhabitable because of conditions and alleged code violations. These failures have left many without access to safe and stable shelter, further perpetuating the cycle of homelessness.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There are other models, in New Jersey and across the country, that have been successful in reducing homelessness. Bergen County and Newark have both made significant strides, with Bergen County reporting a 100% reduction in homelessness and Newark seeing a 58% decrease. Both emphasized providing immediate housing for homeless individuals without preconditions.

I personally attended meetings in Newark and toured their projects and was briefed on how they executed their mission. A hotel was purchased and used. Shelters were brought up to code. Their largest shelter became functional. Storage containers transformed into apartments. Once housed, individuals are offered "wrap-around" services—such as mental health care, addiction treatment, and employment assistance—to help them regain their footing and move toward self-sufficiency.

Houston, Texas, offers another blueprint for success. Under its "Housing First" initiative, the city managed to convince dozens of unconnected agencies to work together under a single umbrella organization, The Way Home. This approach created a streamlined system that allowed Houston to make significant progress in reducing its homeless population.

Here in Atlantic City, organizations committed to our community, such as AtlantiCare, have begun to take action and are well-positioned to lead a collaborative effort to address homelessness. AtlantiCare has been our partner on many initiatives including our mental health co-responder model *Arrive Together* and sponsored two treatment - related court diversion programs, *Opt for Hope and Help* and *Operation Helping Hands*.

In my time as County Prosecutor, I have come to understand a fundamental truth: public health is public safety. When we allow a portion of our community to suffer from homelessness, addiction, and untreated mental health issues, we are not only failing them but also jeopardizing the well-being and safety of our entire community. By not addressing

these issues head-on, we allow crime to persist, emergency services to be overwhelmed, and the fabric of our society to be frayed.

If we are to solve the homelessness crisis in Atlantic City, we must begin by treating the homeless and at-risk populations with dignity, respect, and compassion. This starts with ensuring that they have access to basic healthcare and housing. Without these foundational elements, any further interventions will fail. But if we can come together as a community—government agencies, non-profits, healthcare providers, and residents—we can make a meaningful difference.

The time for action is now. The longer we delay, the more people will fall through the cracks, and the harder it will be to reverse the tide of homelessness. This is not an insurmountable problem; it is one that we can solve if we work together. The playbook and blueprint for success is already out there and shows what is possible when we put aside bureaucratic obstacles and focus on what truly matters: providing stable housing and comprehensive support for those in need.

We have the tools, we have the organizations, and we have the compassion. Now we need the will. Let's be better, together, and finally give our homeless and at-risk populations the chance to contribute to a better and safer future for us all.

The time for change is long overdue. Let's not waste another moment.

William E. Reynolds

Atlantic County Prosecutor