

Testimony of Joseph Kovel

President of the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association

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My name is Joseph Kovel and I have the honor and privilege of serving as President of the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association. We represent over 4,300 State Troopers who protect the neighborhoods, streets and highways of every county of this Commonwealth.

I would like to thank Senator Pippy Chairman of the Senate Law and Justice Committee and Representative Tim Kreiger who is presiding over the House Judiciary Committee today for inviting me to testify. Additionally I would like to thank all members of both committees who are in attendance today for the time and attention they have devoted to Pennsylvania State Police issues today and in the past.

As you are well aware we are here to discuss what have been labeled as separate issues, the closing of the Ephrata barracks and the elimination of the Troop J from the makeup of the Pennsylvania State Police. I disagree with the assertion that these are separate issues. I believe that these issues are one and the same, and that issue is public safety.

You have received other testimony stating how vital the Pennsylvania State Police are to Lancaster County and I know all of that testimony is accurate. One of the core responsibilities of government is to provide public safety. The families of Lancaster County deserve to be protected just like the families of every other county in this Commonwealth. The elimination of the barracks in Ephrata can in no way make northern Lancaster County safer. There is no way that you can remove 20 State Troopers from a community and then turn around to the residents who live there and say "Don't worry." Worry is exactly what the residents of northern Lancaster County should be doing. I have stated before the families of Lancaster County should know that when they go to sleep at night that they can sleep well because the Pennsylvania State Police will protect them. Under this plan I don't know that we can tell them that anymore.

On behalf of the families of Lancaster County I would also ask that the decision to eliminate Troop J from the structure of the Pennsylvania State Police be reconsidered. While very few details have been provided to the PSTA about this plan, we have been advised that approximately 25 positions would be reverted back to patrol duty. While we welcome the idea of more patrol troopers patrolling the neighborhoods of Lancaster County we question how this would happen. The elimination of command staff and specialty services positions is the only way this can happen.

The elimination of command staff raises several issues. The command staffs don't just supervise the Troopers in the stations. The Troop Commander is the top official with whom government officials and citizens of Lancaster and Chester counties interact. The Troop Commander handles all complaints and questions from legislators and the Governor himself. Since the police are the first and most visible representative of government, and knowing that government at the local level is the most responsive to the public it serves, it is truly a disservice to remove the Troop Command for two key counties with heavy populations, multi-jurisdictional criminal activity, and growing traffic concerns. How often do you think Reading will be reaching out to East Hempfield Township? Distance simply equals lack of attention.

You have received additional testimony on how important specialty services are to local police departments as well as to the Troopers who are working in Lancaster and Chester counties. Having services like fire marshals, accident reconstructionists, drug investigation units, polygraph operators, forensic service units respond from Reading for Lancaster county is impractical and a disservice to the families of Lancaster County. It has been mentioned that these actions are necessary due to financial concerns. The absolute last thing government should do is place a price tag on public safety. While we recognize difficult decisions need to be made in regards to the State budget the cutting of State Police services will accomplish only one thing, an increase in crime.

The Pennsylvania State Police need manpower more than ever due to severe drops in complement that are currently showing over 430 vacancies and possibly another 500 plus in the next year. Make no mistake, closing of barracks and reducing the number of Troop headquarters is not based upon improving public safety, which is ludicrous on its face. It is simply about addressing a deficiency of manpower. If the legislature fails to provide funding for a sufficient number of cadets, and I believe that is at least 350, then barracks closures and elimination of troop headquarters will not be limited to Lancaster and Chester counties, but it will be a reality that other counties will face as well. Scuttlebutt within the ranks is that Shickshinny, Phillipsburg, Cory, and Dubois barracks will be the next to fall.

It is very disappointing to me to know that the legislature recognized this problem in the current fiscal year and fulfilled the Governor's request for funding 237 cadets. Unfortunately the Administration then only funded 45 of the cadet positions before transferring the balance of those funds to budgetary reserve. The administration has indicated they will release funds for another 115 cadets from the budgetary reserve, but that still leaves our department 77 Troopers short of what you already funded. That should be troubling to every member of your committees since the State Police complement is at its lowest number in a decade, due to a large number of retirements this year.

The citizens of Lancaster County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania need the help of the administration and the legislature to end this public safety crisis.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I would be happy to answer any questions.