

OPINION: Public safety with responsible reforms a priority for DA

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September 07 2021

Kevin Barton: 'We have a well-functioning public safety system that is striving to be even better.'



PMG FILE PHOTO - Kevin Barton

As district attorney for Washington County, I make a point of thanking the citizens who have served as grand jurors at the end of their term. Selected randomly, these community members review evidence and listen to testimony as they decide whether to file charges in felony criminal cases.

Recently, a grand juror raised her hand with a question. She wondered why, during their month of service, they had not reviewed any murder cases, despite hearing about almost daily shooting deaths in the news.

I reminded her that this is Washington County, not Portland. And while we certainly have our challenges, Washington County remains one of the safest places to live, work, run a business and raise a family in Oregon. Safety is a primary responsibility of the district attorney. As the chief law enforcement official in the county, the district attorney works in collaboration with leaders such as the sheriff, police chiefs and judges to help ensure our public safety system functions effectively.

It's a heavy responsibility. Indeed, my phone often rings in the middle of the night with issues that require urgent attention.

In Washington County, we have a well-functioning public safety system that is striving to be even better. We embrace responsible reform, understanding that while many aspects of our system work well and allow our county to remain safe, we are obligated to evolve to ensure that the needs of our growing and diverse community are met.

We also recognize that there are times when our system has fallen short, especially for those who have been historically marginalized, and we must redouble our efforts to improve and ensure we serve every member of our community.

Washington County is a statewide leader in the use of innovative and new programs to improve our system.

Specialty courts, such as our drug court, mental health court and veterans treatment court, address the root causes of criminal behavior while promoting principles of accountability and rehabilitation.

Creative initiatives such as our campaign to build a "Family Peace Center" to address the impact of trauma on children and young people, demonstrate a new approach to an old challenge — those who suffer trauma early in life are more likely to experience challenges later in life, including interaction with the criminal justice system. Doing more with young people sooner is an important criminal justice reform.

While there is much to be proud of in Washington County, challenges certainly exist. As addiction, mental health and homelessness increase, property crimes are also rising throughout our county. The increasing violence we see on the news does not stop at the county line and is beginning to creep into our community. And perhaps most concerning, a vocal minority of individuals is pushing an extremist "defund police" and "abolish prisons" movement in an attempt to influence Washington County leaders.

These are certainly difficult times. We are living through the twin challenges of both the pandemic and political polarization. While the solution to the former may continue to elude us, the response to the latter

is clear. We must remember that in our participatory government, we are all called upon to be involved and engaged.

In doing so, we should also draw inspiration from John F. Kennedy's words, which may be modified for our present circumstances: Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this community, we all breathe the same air, we all cherish our children's future, and as mortals, we all value our safety.

Kevin Barton is Washington County's district attorney.