

Good morning, I am Bob Merski, Sheriff of Erie County.

I would like to thank Representative Bob Belfanti, Representative Pat Harkins and all the members of the Labor Committee for holding these informational hearings on the issue of the authority and duties of the Office of Sheriff in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

I have been Sheriff of Erie County for 13 years and have worked a total of 31 years in the Sheriff's Office as a law enforcement officer.

Serving as President of the Pennsylvania Sheriff Association, I presented testimony before the House Judiciary Committee in regards to H.B. 466.

The hearing was held in Harrisburg on February 21, 2008.

There was strong opposition to H.B. 466 by the F.O.P., PA Chiefs Association, and State Police.

The bill never moved out of the committee and died.

The major concerns from those groups were training, jurisdiction, authority and county input.

Shortly after the hearings, the Sheriff's Association drafted a bill addressing the concerns of the other parties.

In August of 2009, we arranged meetings with the Pennsylvania Chief's Association, F.O.P., State Police, District Attorney's Association, County Commissioners Association, and the Attorney General.

These meetings were held in September 2009. The parties involved conducted what appeared to be an honest dialogue; with the exception of the state police. There was a promise of suggestions in the hopes of reaching a compromise. After several months with no response, we reached out again to the Chief's Association, the F.O.P., and the State Police.

Not one suggestion to address their concerns was made by these organizations. We then amended the bill ourselves to make it more acceptable to them. After we made the changes, the argument became "The Sheriff's are trying to expand their authority." We are not trying to expand our authority; we are simply trying to restore our original ability to uphold the laws of the commonwealth.

Since 1634, when this nation was in its infancy, the Sheriff has played a major role in law enforcement and continues to do so today.

All you have to do is look around us. New York, Ohio, West Virginia and Maryland-in all these states, Sheriff's Offices have statutory authority to enforce the law.

Now, ask yourself, what is government about?

Our founding fathers said that the government should be of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Yet the Sheriff's Office, a constitutional office elected by the people has to ask for the blessings of special interest groups to receive statutory authority?

Let us say this, before any of these organizations were formed, the Sheriffs of the Commonwealth were enforcing the laws of this Commonwealth.

To support my point, in 2006, a poll was conducted of 700 registered voters in Pennsylvania on the issue of the Sheriff's authority and duties.

The poll found that 65 percent believed that Deputy Sheriffs should be allowed to investigate crimes and make arrests.

64 percent said they favored giving Deputy Sheriffs the same law enforcement authority as state and local police. Only 25 percent said they did not believe Deputy Sheriffs should have the same authority.

The same poll also showed that 73 percent of Pennsylvanians, at that time, were not aware that Deputy Sheriffs did not have the same authority as state and local police.

This poll clearly shows the expectation the people have of their Sheriff's Office and that is to serve and protect the citizens of our countries.

Since 1994, the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office has had statutory authority to function as a law enforcement agency, the only county in Pennsylvania, to have this authority.

Allegheny County is proof that this can work.

This legislation will give all Sheriffs the same authority to investigate crimes in our courthouses and county property, to assist other agencies when needed and take away any doubt that Deputy Sheriffs are full partners in law enforcement.

This legislation would allow us to perform the duties we performed before, in my opinion, the two erroneous court decisions; duties the sheriff has done for over 200 years.

It would allow Sheriffs and Deputy Sheriffs in all 67 counties to perform the job we were sworn to do, serve and protect. H.B. 2585 would allow Sheriffs, especially those in rural counties where they are desperately needed, to enforce the law and protect the citizens in their counties.

The people of the Commonwealth support this legislation and support their local Sheriffs. We are collectively entrusted to serve the public and provide them with safe communities.

There is no good reason to exclude over 2,200 fully trained and certified Deputy Sheriffs from protecting the citizens in our community.

Thank you and I will entertain any questions.