



# NEWS

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## **New Montco Program Cuts Down on Police Overtime, Saves Taxpayer Dollars, and Improves Public Safety**

**Norristown, PA (October 27, 2014)** – A suspect is in the Montgomery County Correctional Facility in Eagleville and is scheduled for a preliminary hearing in district court in Abington. Under normal circumstances, two Abington police officers, probably on overtime, would make the 26-mile, 40-minute (on a good day) drive to the prison and transport the inmate to the district court. After the court proceeding, the officers would retrace their steps returning the inmate to the prison and return to Abington.

In the case of early morning hearings, the initial transport is done the night before necessitating housing the suspect in the municipal lockup.

The process costs Abington taxpayers police overtime pay, wear and tear and gasoline for the police vehicle and the inmate is less secure during the transport than he or she would be remaining behind bars. Is there a better way?

The Montgomery County Commissioners and law enforcement officials believe they have found it. Under a new pilot program instituted last March, negotiations are held between local police and the public defender's office to have the suspect waive their right to an in-person appearance in court. Assistant district attorneys are available to consult and work with the police and public defenders to determine whether the terms of the waivers are appropriate. Then, instead of bringing the defendant to the district court, the preliminary hearing is held via a video conference hookup between the district court and the prison. This eliminates the need for the four-way transport and the need to take the suspect from prison confines.

This results in obvious cost savings, potentially safer streets, and less stress on local police resources.

“Our new waiver program is a perfect example of the collaborative nature of this administration, and our partners in this effort – the magisterial district justices, district attorney’s office, the public defender’s office, and the police chiefs – deserve a great deal of the credit for making it happen,” said Josh Shapiro, chair of the Montgomery County Commissioners. “Everyone is a winner here, especially the taxpayers.”

The pilot program now includes 10 MDJ offices participating and 12 police departments within their coverage areas. There are 30 district courts in the county.

One of the leaders in implementing the waiver program has been Chief Public Defender Keir Bradford-Grey.

“The preliminary hearing video waiver program has been working very well as part of our new model of holistic client-centered representation,” Bradford-Grey said. “The program allows us to engage our clients at the earliest possible opportunity, so we may ascertain, not only the legal issues involved in their case, but also identify our client's possible drug addiction or mental health treatment needs and get them on the path to rehabilitation sooner,” she added.

“The efficient administration of justice is one of the overarching goals of our role in this program. By getting to the right result in cases quickly we are able to help victims as well as provide for savings for the citizens of our community,” said District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman.

“This program has produced a cost savings without question,” said Abington Police Department Deputy Chief John Livingood. “For every hearing we send two (police officers) to Eagleville the night before the hearing, and then lodge them until the next day in our lockup. We then have to feed them, transport them with two more police officers to the hearing, and then many times back to the lockup. We may have to feed them again, and finally we send two more police officers to transport them back to Eagleville.”

Chief Livingood added that keeping the suspect in the lockup requires constant monitoring and periodic physical checks. “The little bit of time required to negotiate and do a waiver is a pittance compared to bringing them here to do it live in front of the MDJ,” he said.

Both Bradford-Grey and Livingood attributed much of the early success of the program to the Public Defender’s Chief of Pre-trial, Gregory Nester, who works closely with the Magisterial District Court

Judges and staff, members of police departments, and Montgomery County Correctional Facility Warden Julio Algarin to create a successful system that has so many collateral benefits.

Limerick Township Chief of Police William J. Albany, who is also president of the Police Chiefs Association of Montgomery County, praised the early results of the program.

“It has been very successful so far, and I am anxious to have it expand throughout the county,” Albany said. “It keeps police officers on the street where they belong, but there are still refinements that need to be made.”

Commissioner Bruce L. Castor, Jr., a former district attorney and the board of commissioners’ public safety liaison, also praised the new program. “The costs savings are obvious,” Castor said, “but this program would be worth it simply for the enhanced public safety aspect of it. Any time you can keep a suspect behind bars rather than transporting them all over the county, it significantly decreases the possibility of a security breach.”