

NEWS

Lawmakers call for extending attorney general's jurisdiction to address Philadelphia gun violence

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With Philadelphia on pace to break last year's record murder rate, two state lawmakers are pushing legislation to permanently grant the state attorney general's office concurrent jurisdiction with Philadelphia's district attorney to prosecute gun crimes that happen in that city.

A [bipartisan-backed law signed in 2019](#) granted the attorney general this authority as part of a two-year pilot. That expired in June without ever being used.

In discussing [the measure](#) at a Capitol news conference, the bill's sponsor Rep. Martina White, R-Philadelphia, who was joined by Rep. Craig Williams, R-Delaware County, said she wants to give Democratic Attorney General Josh Shapiro a second chance in hopes he'll use this crime-fighting tool to help address the problem of illegal guns being used to commit murder on Philadelphia streets.

"As legislators, we can only give prosecutors more tools to fight crime," White said. "It is up to them to use these tools to stop the senseless murders destroying families throughout Philadelphia."

She said between Shapiro's refusal to use the concurrent jurisdiction and Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner's "refusal to do his job, the criminals know it is open season. As state officials, we have the responsibility to oversee the public safety in our cities and counties, When local officials refuse to act, we must."

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Neither she nor Williams acknowledged having a direct conversation with Shapiro about his reasons for not using the concurrent authority although White attributed to "these public officials yielding to an agenda of progressive activists rather than the people of Philadelphia who are pleading for help in the fight against record-breaking homicides."

A statement from Shapiro's office called the proposed legislation renewing his office's concurrent jurisdiction over gun crime in Philadelphia "a fake solution to a very real problem in Philadelphia; and put forth with no input from our office."

Shapiro's office called for action on different legislation that it believes would be more meaningful to addressing the problem.

"The General Assembly should stop passing the buck and act. Close the ghost gun loophole [by requiring background checks] that is fueling violence and putting guns in the hands of criminals. Pass mandatory bail reform for gun crimes so these criminals aren't back out on our streets the very next day. And help cities fill hundreds of police officer vacancies and expand services. These steps would actually help reduce violence – not this finger pointing," the office statement said.

Krasner's spokeswoman Jane Roh called White and Williams' news conference a "comically timed stunt" that was held on the same day the Republican majority in the state Senate was scheduled to vote on a bill to block Philadelphia and other local governments from "enacting life-saving gun restrictions because these same lawmakers will not."

Moreover, Roh accused White and Williams of ignoring the collaborative work the district attorney and attorney general's office have done through the state-funded Gun Violence Task Force, "which has shut down several major violent gang operations since 2018 and has a caseload of more than 530 active cases."

"The success of our Gun Violence Task Force means we need more agents and resources than ever," said Krasner spokeswoman Jane Roh. "Today's stunt shows that support for law enforcement won't be coming from either of these politicians."

According to the Attorney General's office, 630 arrests have been made by this task force between 2017 and 2021 with 1,104 firearms recovered. In 2021, its work led to 202 gun-related arrests which is up 85% from the prior year, and 368 firearms recovered, an increase of 104% from 2020. It recovered 571 ghost guns in Philadelphia in 2021, an increase of 128% from the prior year.

At the news conference Williams, a cosponsor of White's legislation, a former federal prosecutor, and husband of U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District Jennifer Arbittier Williams, highlighted the \$1.5 million included in this year's state budget was recently released to hire 10 deputized federal prosecutors in Philadelphia and Delaware counties.

Those prosecutors will work under the U.S. Department of Justice's supervision exclusively prosecuting cases involving convicted felons in possession of firearms, who he said are overwhelmingly the ones responsible for violent gun crime.

"The next step is for the two district attorneys [in Delaware and Philadelphia counties] to work with the U.S. Attorney's office to fill those positions to begin prosecuting gun crime federally," Williams said.

White added: "The fact that local and state elected officials are not prosecuting our firearm crimes and we have to resort to the level of the federal government coming down and have to do this job they are supposed to be doing is a sad state of affairs."

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1 of 4

How important an issue is reducing crime in your decisions about whom to vote for in state and local elections?

- It is the most important issue
- It is not an important issue
- It will strongly influence my decision
- I do not believe it should be a priority

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