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January 9th, 2023

The Honorable Bill Lee

Governor of Tennessee

1st Floor, State Capitol

600 Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Blvd.

Nashville, TN 37243

RE: Investing in a Safer Tennessee

Dear Governor Lee,

The cost of crime cannot be measured in dollars and cents alone. Lives destroyed cannot easily be restored, and recently, too many Tennesseans have lost their life forever. In Shelby County, Tennessee, the recent violent crime epidemic has taken too much from those that often have the least to give.

As business and community leaders, confidence in our local public safety system has fallen to an unsustainable low. Crime is impacting our neighbors, customers, employees, and investors. Tennesseans deserve to feel safe buying groceries, getting gas and going to work. Our community needs your direct intervention.

In the aftermath of the global pandemic, our businesses and personal practices have normalized; meanwhile, two civic pillars have not rebounded - our local judicial system and law enforcement agencies. The data is clear. Shelby County is experiencing a resurgence of organized crime, an increase in violent crimes committed with a firearm and a sustained lack of criminal prosecution originally caused by the global pandemic.

During this sustained violent crime surge, a report from former Shelby County Criminal Court Judge Bobby Carter noted less than 40 jury trials have taken place in 2023 compared to a pre-Covid historical average of more than 200¹. The role of trials, and by extension, jurors have been stripped away from the people and concentrated in the District Attorney and Public Defender's Offices. With 56,000 plus jail bookings per year², how can less than 40 jury trials per year be fair and equitable justice? We ask for your support to help increase the number of trials in Shelby County and to assist in resolving the backlog of violent crimes for the sake of those accused, the healing power of resolution for victims and the deterrence effect of upholding the law.

On December 20th, Shelby County General Sessions Criminal Court Judge Karen Massey called the Shelby County Public Defender's office 'a sad state of affairs' and questioned 'how many years are we gonna have to

¹ wiloandco. 2023. "Shelby County Criminal Justice Report." The City of Memphis. December 1, 2023.
<https://www.memphistn.gov/shelby-county-criminal-justice-report/>.

² Shelby County Sheriff's Office



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do this if the current administration cannot hire people"? ³Judge Massey delayed another high-profile murder trial. According to media reports, the Public Defender's Office Major Case team has two staff members juggling 37 first-degree murder cases. A lack of resources cannot be an excuse for a state as fiscally sound as the State of Tennessee. We cannot allow this 'sad state of affairs' to remain because of a lack of political will to intervene.

Organized crime has played an outsized role in Shelby County. Street gangs are actively recruiting "opportunity youth", terrorizing everyday Tennesseans, and brazenly acting with impunity due to the lack of criminal prosecutions in conjunction with "catch and release" bail policies and the overwhelming use of sweetheart plea deals to resolve case load negligence.

Law enforcement may feel uneasy labeling this crime wave as "organized"; however, we are left with no other definition when multiple people conspire to engage in criminal activity like "smash and grab" techniques against retail operations, thousands of vehicle break-ins and the widespread use of illegally obtained firearms. These crimes are not limited to retail operations or petty crimes as there has been a surge in the number of retaliatory murders. In 2023, the City of Memphis set a new homicide record⁴ with the number of homicides surpassing more than one per day. These are not crimes of the moment but premeditated attacks on our businesses, employees, customers, and families.

We need your support! Specifically, we implore you to consider the following executive and legislative items:

- Allocate \$50,000,000 in block grant funding for crime reduction strategies using technology and human capital for Tourist Zones in Memphis, TN.
- Surge available resources into Shelby County to clear the violent crime case backlog, including additional resources for the Shelby County Public Defender's Office and the use of judicial officials from outside Shelby County.
- Pass legislation making the possession of a stolen firearm a felony.

³ "Amid Rebuke, Public Defender Recused from Another Murder Case." n.d. Memphis Local, Sports, Business & Food News | Daily Memphian. Accessed January 5, 2024. https://dailymemphian.com/subscriber/section/metrocriminal-justice/article/40496/judge-allows-public-defenders-office-to-recuse?utm_source=early_word_email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NA_EMAIL_PREVIEW_ONLY&utm_content=suonly.

⁴ "397 Homicides in Memphis Last Year, Another New Record." 2024. WREG.com. January 1, 2024. <https://wreg.com/news/2023-goes-down-as-a-violent-year-in-memphis/>.



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- Support and pass Senator Brent Taylor's blended sentencing legislation.
- Support and pass Senator Brent Taylor's bail reform measures.
- Support and pass legislation to permit civil forfeiture of vehicles involved in drag racing or reckless driving.
- Maintain and increase the hiring and retention bonuses for Tennessee Highway Patrol Officers on duty in Shelby County.

As business and community leaders, we share your vision for a healthy, vibrant Tennessee. We know this crime surge will end with vigorous investigation, prosecution, conviction and sentencing of violent criminals.

We are committed to investing in our local communities, to growing the tax base and providing the necessary resources to address some of the root causes of crime and poverty. We have more than \$3 billion of local capital projects in the planning process, plus represent tens of thousands of employees asking for your intervention. Shelby County can be a model for the country and regain its world-renowned reputation as a premier entertainment, distribution, industrial, health care, and technology center. Your leadership and support are needed now more than ever.

Sincerely,

Ted Townsend
President & CEO
Greater Memphis Chamber



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