

Kaul calls for Legislative action on his \$115M public safety plan

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AG Josh Kaul in a new WisPolitics.com interview called on the Legislature to pass at least some portions of his \$115 million public safety plan to help stem an increase in violent crime.

The increase in violent crime is part of a nationwide trend, which he said stems partly from pandemic-related issues and shows the need for more investment in the Department of Justice.

Kaul told WisPolitics.com lawmakers should approve measures in the package such as grant funding for community policing efforts, officer recruitment and retention, violence prevention, and mental health and substance abuse treatment programs.

He also called for passing gun safety legislation included in the package, such as universal background checks.

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Kaul faulted the GOP-controlled Legislature for instead focusing on investigating conspiracy theories about the 2020 election.

“It’s been unfortunate that our Legislature hasn’t taken action on those issues and instead has been focused on things like this investigation into a conspiracy theory, but I’m hopeful that we will in the new year see some attention paid to these issues from the Legislature,” he said.

Kaul added that in the meantime, DOJ has supported local law enforcement through officer training programs and advocating for more community investments while investigating and prosecuting serious crimes.

While critics say he did not do enough to address the violent protests in Kenosha earlier this year, Kaul said he acted quickly to investigate the Kenosha Police shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man from the area.

“We were the agency that led the investigation into the Jacob Blake shooting,” he said. “I personally was in Kenosha the next day talking about how that process works and how we were going to conduct a fair, impartial investigation. And I was back in Kenosha two days after that.”

He said Gov. Tony Evers provided support to local law enforcement that requested help with security by sending the Wisconsin National Guard as protests developed.

Republicans have knocked Kaul over the performance of the state’s crime lab. The last agency report, released in April, showed a drop in overall cases received in 2020 compared to 2019 and 2018. Still, the mean and median time to turn around cases in some areas increased. For example, the DNA analysis unit took in 3,820 cases in 2020, compared to 4,400 in 2019 and 8,626 in 2018. The mean, or average, turnaround time in 2020 was 94 days compared to 80 in 2018 and the median, or midpoint, was 70 compared to 50.

The report noted the lab faced additional challenges during the pandemic that impacted workflow, including accommodations for remote work and staggering shifts in the lab to help maintain adequate social distancing.

The report also noted the agency saw a drop in program revenue due to the 2018 lame-duck laws Republicans approved that made changes to how money from settlements was used. DOJ said it held open positions as a result.

While case investigation time has increased and the caseload has decreased between 2018 and 2020, Kaul said that’s because DNA analysts are able to dig deeper into cases and more accurately identify suspects. But crime labs could do more with more funding and support, he said.

“We also need our Legislature to step up because there has been significant underinvestment in communities in Wisconsin for decades really, and in our criminal justice system,” he said. “And right now we’ve got about a two-and-a-half billion dollar surplus.”