

Washington County Sheriff's Office

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To the Joint Standing Committee of: Judiciary

Chair: Senator Anne Carney

Chair: Representative Amy Huhn

Committee Clerk:
Susan Pinette

L.D. 16 An Act To Establish Separate Prosecutorial Districts in Downeast Maine

Dear Committee Members and Respective Chairs:

Good Morning - my name is Barry Curtis, Sheriff of Washington County. Before being elected in 2014, I served the Maine State Police for 25 years as a Trooper. The last 15 years of my career, I moved home to serve the citizens of Troop J, which covers Washington and Hancock Counties. After being elected in 2014 I realized things had changed in law enforcement and I had only taken a four-year break. The types of crimes changed, the frequency of crime changed and the demands of law enforcement had changed. Since law enforcement officer's caseloads become the caseloads of the District Attorney's Office, these changes have also greatly impacted them.

Around 1975 District Attorney's Offices replaced County Attorneys and at this time counties were combined to form the current Prosecution Districts. Since 1975 Washington County has shared a District Attorney with Hancock County. In the last 45 years there have only been three District Attorneys elected and all three have been from Hancock County. As a matter of fact, one individual moved from Washington County to Hancock County before running for the office.

Washington County is a relatively large county, in excess of 3000 square miles, which is over twice the size of the State of Rhode Island but has the population of the city of

Bangor. Our county has two District Attorney's Offices and two courthouses; one in Machias and the other in Calais, 33 miles apart. Historically, as well as currently, the District Attorney has their office in Ellsworth which means he or she will travel to Washington County when necessary. The District Attorney's office in Ellsworth is 57 miles away from the office in Machias and 91 miles away from the office in Calais.

Washington County use to have Assistant District Attorneys as well as Deputy District Attorneys that lived and worked in Washington County. This has not been the case in recent years as we have gone from three full time Assistant District Attorneys to one full time and one-part time. It is my understanding there are open positions, but filling them has proven to be quite difficult. Hancock County currently has three Assistant District Attorneys plus the District Attorney to handle the caseloads for that county.

Over the last five years, in my position as Sheriff, I have seen a decline in the number of cases being prosecuted. It seems more and more cases are plead down or just dismissed. I feel this is a direct correlation to the caseload and lack of personnel in Washington County. I understand the difficulties in running and managing offices so far away from one another, while still working on caseloads, and running the office in Hancock County and working so shorthanded.

I want to be clear, when I say, this is not about our current District Attorney, this is about the position of District Attorney. These issues will be present regardless of the person in the office as long as they live in Hancock County. I would suspect similar issues if the District Attorney lived and worked mostly in Washington County. Too that point, the population of Hancock County is 55,497 compared to Washington County's 31,595. Therefore, I don't foresee a District Attorney being elected from Washington County. If the citizens of Washington County are unhappy with the job I am doing as their Sheriff, they have the option of electing a new Sheriff. I am not sure this is the case with the District Attorney as long as the position encompasses both Washington and Hancock counties.

It is my opinion the citizens of Washington County would greatly benefit from having our own District Attorney. Having a District Attorney, dedicated to the people of Washington County would allow better management of the offices, caseloads as well as allow more time to work hand in hand with Law Enforcement. Thus providing a better service to the citizens of Washington County and quite frankly the citizens of Hancock County as well.

Thank you for your time today, it is greatly appreciated.

