

## For Immediate Release

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## Collaboration Leading to Safer Communities Across South Dakota

**Sioux Falls/Rapid City/Pierre, South Dakota:** A collaborative approach to creating safer communities across South Dakota is making a difference in the state. The group called Safe South Dakota formed in the summer of 2022 with the intent of bringing together representatives from different agencies across the state to communicate some of the challenges and accomplishments they face in their respective fields. Safe South Dakota convenes on a scheduled one-hour conference call monthly, where the time is used to review successes in their respective fields and share the biggest public safety challenges facing their respective agencies.

“What started as informal touchpoints between various government agencies has led to significant positive results in public safety across South Dakota,” said Mayor Paul TenHaken of Sioux Falls. “After our first meeting as a group, we quickly realized our communities were not alone in the challenges we were facing and continue to be presented with. I’m grateful this group of distinguished leaders across our state is taking the time to have open communication to create a safer South Dakota.”

There are several agencies represented across the state with various individuals participating in these conversations. Those representatives include:

- Mayor Paul TenHaken of Sioux Falls
- Mayor Jason Salamun of Rapid City
- Secretary Kellie Wasko with the South Dakota Department of Corrections
- Minnehaha County Sheriff Mike Milstead
- Minnehaha County State’s Attorney Daniel Haggar
- Pennington County Sheriff Brian Mueller
- Pennington County State’s Attorney Lara Roetzel
- Rapid City Police Chief Don Hedrick
- Sioux Falls Police Chief Jon Thum
- Ryan Brunner with Governor Kristi Noem’s Office
- Greg Sattizahn, South Dakota State Court Administrator
- Minnehaha County Commissioner Jean Bender

“One of our goals has been to increase accountability for offenders on probation and parole,” said Pennington County Sheriff Brian Mueller. “We have a powerful group at the table, from elected officials, public safety leaders, and presiding judges in Pennington and Minnehaha Counties to our Secretary of Corrections and the Governor’s Office. It’s early, but we believe our team approach in our two largest cities will continue to be a factor in reducing violent crime.”

Many agencies have seen positive change since communicating with their counterparts across the state during the monthly meetings. The Department of Corrections (DOC) reported in the fall of 2022, the agency had an all-time high number of absconders from parole of 486. Through these coordinated Safe South Dakota meetings, it was also determined there was a large number of DOC absconders that were involved in new crimes in the communities. The Absconder Apprehension Unit (AAU) was then assembled in December and began operations in January 2023. The unit is comprised of experienced parole agents who work alongside local law enforcement, U.S. Marshals, the Department of Public Safety, and additional task force operators across the state to apprehend parole absconders. The number of parole absconders in the state has decreased to 256 as of July 31, 2023.

In addition to the AAU, the executive team began to review the operations of the parole division and initiated the “knock and talk” concept for parole agents. The “knock and talk” is parole agents simply being more proactive by getting out into the community and stopping to observe and talk with parolees after hours and on weekends. This allows agents to check in and ensure parolees are following the conditions of their parole.

“The parole division has worked very hard to ensure that there are multiple interventions to decrease criminal activity involving parolees, and we continue to work on initiatives to decrease crime in South Dakota,” said DOC Secretary Kellie Wasko. “Collaborating with this group will continue to improve and ensure public safety.”

In addition to the efforts from the DOC, this group also jumpstarted the creation and ultimate passing of Senate Bill 146 in the 2023 South Dakota Legislative Session. Through this group’s open communication, it was determined many of the violent crimes occurring in communities were being committed by parolees who were released too early. SB 146, also known as the “truth in sentencing bill,” removes the opportunity of parole for certain violent crimes and requires others to serve most of their time the judge gave them during sentencing.

“We are grateful that Senator Brent Hoffman and Representative Sue Peterson championed this bill in the 2023 legislative session to hold violent offenders accountable for their crimes,” said Minnehaha County State’s Attorney Daniel Hagggar. “While Truth in Sentencing is an important first step in restoring community confidence, more work remains to ensure that the public remains safe as these violent offenders are re-integrated into the community after serving their sentence.”

Based on the success to date, the Safe South Dakota group continues to hold regular meetings and ongoing discussions with legislative leaders on public safety opportunities on both local and statewide levels.

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