

West Virginia governor orders National Guard to Huntington after drug-related killings

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After a spate of homicides in Huntington, West Virginia, Governor Jim Justice announced he was deploying the National Guard to the small city of 53,000. The governor made the announcement during a televised town hall meeting in Huntington Thursday afternoon.

So far this year, the city has been the scene of 19 confirmed homicides, with two others under investigation. A string of five shootings resulting in three deaths in the past week has catapulted Huntington ahead of Cleveland and New Orleans in terms of per capita homicides. This rail hub on the Ohio River now sits just behind St. Louis and Baltimore, large cities battered by deindustrialization, in the nationwide violent crime rankings.

The violence, along with an increase in theft and robberies, has set many working class residents on edge and contributed to the efforts by politicians to whip up fear and a siege mentality. The deployment of National Guard forces to respond to civilian drug crimes sets a dangerous precedent in the United States.

In an interview with MetroNews' "Talkline" radio show October 14, Huntington Mayor Steve Williams described the killings as a turf war and largely internal to the drug trade. "Don't think for a minute that we don't know who is causing harm," Williams said. "We know who they are and where they are and we are going to come in and lock them away for years to come." Williams suggested that drugs like meth and crack cocaine, not just heroin, were fueling "some bit of craziness and aggressive drug dealers with it."

Governor Justice, who switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican earlier this year, seized on the violence to burnish his law-and-order credentials in an apparently snap decision in front of television cameras. "I'm going to call upon our National Guard," Justice declared to local television station WSAZ. "Our National Guard has resources that can absolutely combat this thing." In his typically incoherent manner, Justice intoned that Huntington must replace "drugs for jobs ... When I was here it was the

great town in the world. Streets running one way, avenues running another way. It was a sweater-type town."

Now Huntington will be a "martial-law-type town," with National Guard troops deployed to reinforce civil law enforcement. It is unclear whether the governor either consulted with Mayor Williams or forewarned National Guard officials before his announcement. Major General James Hoyer, the adjutant general of the state's National Guard, released a video on social media Thursday night attempting to explain the "technical support" role the military force would play, ostensibly in response to public dismay over the prospect of "boots on the ground."

"That doesn't mean setting a Humvee on every street corner," Justice insisted. "We can't do that because the National Guard doesn't get involved with law enforcement. But between the National Guard, the state police and great police of the city of Huntington we're going to stop it."

Huntington has gained national notoriety in the past few years as an epicenter of the opioid crisis. West Virginia has a fatal overdose rate of 35.3 per 100,000—far outpacing the already staggering national death rate of 15 per 100,000 for drug overdoses.

Huntington's Cabell County, population approximately 100,000, saw an appalling 105 fatal overdoses in the first nine months of the year, most of them attributable to heroin or other opioids.

Huntington Fire Chief Jan Rader has estimated that as many as *one in ten* Cabell County residents are drug-addicted. "We average 5.3 overdoses a day in Huntington, West Virginia," Rader told NBC's "Meet the Press" October 30. "Twenty-six percent of the time that my guys get a call, they are climbing on their truck and going to an overdose."

Rader has gained a national profile following the Netflix release of a short documentary, *Heroin(e)*, a film that follows the fire chief and two other women involved in responding to the drug crisis. In interviews, she and other

emergency responders have repeatedly stressed the necessity for drug rehabilitation programs. In Cabell County, Rader explained on PBS's "Bill Moyers" program November 22, thousands of addicts have access to "only eight detox beds," none of them medically assisted.

The city has served as a stage backdrop for Democratic and Republican politicians who seek to pose as champions of drug treatment, law-and-order, or some combination of the two. In 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders made a well-attended campaign stop in Huntington to give his standard stump speech railing against the "billionaire class." Last summer, Republican President Donald Trump filled the same arena with supporters for a rally in which he issued promises to bring jobs to the region, crippled by the collapse in the coal industry.

In early October, First Lady Melania Trump ventured out into the open air for a photo-op at Lily's Place, Huntington's specialized infant recovery center for babies born with neonatal abstinence syndrome. The president's wife traveled with Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway and Republican Congressman Evan Jenkins. Unsurprisingly, the few public comments issued during the visit were couched in platitudes about personal responsibility. "No promises were made," WSAZ reported, "but there are plans to keep in touch" with medical providers.

The promises of politicians for meaningful drug treatment are nothing more than lip service. As a few million dollars are pledged here and there, the Trump administration has moved to gut Medicaid and other lifeline health care services. Much federal money earmarked for emergency response has been allocated to police departments rather than rehabilitation services.

In early December, the state Department of Health and Human Resources announced \$20.8 million in lawsuit settlements with pharmaceutical companies involved in creating the opioid epidemic would be divided among nine drug treatment programs. Huntington's Marshall University Recovery Center for Families was earmarked \$2.8 million to provide residential treatment services for pregnant women.

Meanwhile, municipal emergency services have been all but bankrupted by the cost of naloxone, the anti-opioid drug used to reverse overdoses. The Evzio-branded naloxone auto-injector device runs at approximately \$4,500 for a box containing only two doses. Naloxone delivered by auto-injector can cost up to \$3,800 per dose. The nasal delivery version of Narcan, which is not as effective for overdose cases involving fentanyl-laced heroin, runs \$50 per dose.

Thousands of lives have been saved by emergency responders, but the effort has cost Huntington and Cabell County emergency services a staggering \$100 million in the past year and a half.

In communities smaller than Huntington, the funding crisis has had a shattering impact on municipal budgets. Funding for emergency services are completely threadbare, staff are run ragged, and naloxone shortages are widespread. Of West Virginia's 434 local fire departments, a November 16 *Charleston Gazette-Mail* article noted, all but 16 are volunteer.

Many cities in West Virginia and throughout the country are dysfunctional and falling deeper into debt—opening their infrastructure up to be picked clean by the bond rating agencies and hedge fund vultures. America's drug epidemic is fundamentally an expression of the rapacious appetite of the capitalist class.

Consider: just three pharmaceutical companies at the center of the opioid racket—McKesson, Cardinal Health, and AmerisourceBergen—pull in revenues of \$400 billion every year. These three companies were responsible for supplying hundreds of millions of addictive painkillers to West Virginia over a five-year period, causing the deaths of at least 1,700 people.

The legal settlements are little more than pocket change for the pharmaceutical giants, and will do little to alleviate the crisis. Nothing short of the expropriation of the profits of the major pharmaceuticals will suffice to address the social devastation they have wrought. Working people in West Virginia and across the US must fight for genuine redress by liquidating the ill-gotten gains of these capitalist criminals. Only through a massive reorganization of economic life to meet pressing social needs will the working class gain the resources required to restore their lives and rehabilitate their loved ones.



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