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## In Utah visit, Attorney General Jeff Sessions promotes a national effort to crack down on violent crime by seeking long sentences



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Before a friendly audience full of Utah police officers, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions hailed a record-breaking number of federal prosecutions in violent crime and promised that the renewed emphasis on aggressive prosecutions would continue.

Standing in Utah's Capitol Rotunda, Sessions cited declining crime figures and high-profile convictions as evidence that the initiative, Project Safe Neighborhoods 2.0, is working in this state and across the nation.

"We're targeting the most dangerous people in the most violent areas," Sessions told a roughly 600-person audience that included Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, state Attorney General Sean Reyes and hundreds of law enforcement officers from around the state.

One year ago, Sessions revived Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a George W. Bush-era strategy that had faded during the Obama administration, after noticing an upswing in violent crime rates that had been on the wane since the early 1990s. Utah experienced increases higher than the national average, with violent crime rates climbing by double digits in 2015 and 2016.

“This is not Utah,” U.S. Attorney for Utah John Huber said. “And so I was very motivated to join with Attorney General Sessions to say, ‘Enough is enough.’”

Through the initiative, federal prosecutors have worked with law enforcement agencies to target offenders in cases involving guns, drugs and gangs, officials said at Wednesday’s gathering. The heightened scrutiny from U.S. attorneys means these criminals are more likely to end up in federal court, where they’re often exposed to longer sentences.

But Sessions said increasing the prison population isn’t the objective.

“Our goal is not to fill up the courts or fill up the prisons. Our goal is to reduce crime, to make our communities safer,” he said.

Huber said federal prosecutors handled a case against a Provo man who sent a Snapchat of himself pointing a gun at four police officers and wrote that for “15 snapshots I’ll shoot every last one.” The man, Jonah Robinson, pleaded guilty to illegally possessing a firearm and possession of child pornography and was sentenced to 80 months in prison.

“He’s done,” Huber said.

Huber’s attorneys last year also secured a conviction for the man accused of killing Millard County sheriff’s Deputy Josie Greathouse Fox in 2010. Roberto Miramontes Roman first stood trial for the slaying in state court in 2012 but was acquitted of the crime.

Following Roman’s federal conviction, a judge sentenced him to life plus 80 years in prison, Huber said.

Huber heaped praise on Sessions during the event, calling the attorney general a mentor to him and a “true American.” He urged the audience members to give the attorney general a “hearty Utah welcome,” and they obliged with a standing ovation as Sessions took the stage.

It was a warm reception for the beleaguered attorney general, who has borne harsh criticism from his boss, President Donald Trump, for his decision not to oversee the Russia probe. Sessions recused himself because he was part of Trump’s campaign team.

As part of reinvigorating PSN last year, Huber’s office was reorganized so three-fourths of the criminal assistant U.S. attorneys were focused on prosecuting violent crime. In 2017, attorneys in his office filed 200 cases through the initiative.

Sessions said the Department of Justice prosecuted a record number of violent criminals in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30.

Huber credited PSN with contributing to recent reductions in crime rates; reports of violent crime dipped by 8 percent in Utah during 2017 compared with the previous year, he noted.

While Sessions celebrated this downward trend, he said the project’s work is far from over and announced that the Department of Justice is awarding \$30 million in new grants to 86 districts across the nation, with Utah slated to receive \$262,000.

In Ogden, the money could support investigations into gang activity and drug trafficking organizations, said Police Chief Randy Watt.

The city in April was designated as a PSN target area, meaning among other things that every felony case is screened for potential federal prosecution. Twenty-five federal cases from the Ogden area have been filed since the spring, Huber’s office reported.

One advantage of prosecuting criminals through federal courts is that prisoners aren’t eligible for parole, Watt said.

“When it comes to violent crime and career criminals, every minute I can keep them off the streets of Ogden, Weber County or out of Salt Lake County is a good minute,” he told reporters after Session’s address.

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