



Meeker County Sheriff's Office

Brian Cruze, Sheriff ★ Bill Hudson, Chief Deputy

March 18, 2025

Representative Wayne Johnson
658 Cedar Street
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Johnson,

I write this letter in support of HF 2259. In addition to being the Sheriff of Meeker County, I am the board chair of our local Violent Crime Enforcement Team, commonly referred to as VCET. I also sit on the MN Sheriffs' Association Legislative Committee. I apologize that I am unable to appear in person but ironically, I have our local VCET board meeting just before the Public Safety Committee meeting and will be unable to make the drive down in time.

At our VCET meeting we will be discussing, at length, our funding shortfalls and how we may have to remove a detective from the team to make ends meet. I would like to take this opportunity to explain the work and funding of our VCET and how the funding comes from the State of Minnesota.

The local VCET that I chair is called the CEE-VI Drug Task Force, which serves the counties of Meeker, Kandiyohi, Swift and Yellow Medicine. The population for this area is just under 100,000 people. VCETs are set up to investigate and prosecute narcotics, gang and related violent crime. Last year our local VCET made 403 arrests, seized 25 guns, executed 318 search warrants and seized almost 24 pounds of methamphetamine. To put that in perspective, that is enough methamphetamine for 108,000 people to get high once. While methamphetamine is still king in West Central MN, last year we also had cases involving cocaine, fentanyl, LSD, marijuana, ecstasy, psilocybin mushrooms, and various prescription abuse cases. Compared to other parts of the state, we have relatively low fentanyl/opioid related cases, although we have had several overdoses in our area in past year or two.

The funding for our VCET comes through the Violent Crimes Coordinating Council commonly referred to as the V triple C. VCCC provides the oversight for the VCETs in Minnesota. The current funding is \$10 million dollars per biennium for 21 VCETs throughout the state. Next year there is a new VCET in the Brainerd area, a metro VCET that was picked up by another larger VCET and at least one current VCET is asking to add a county who will all be asking for

additional funding. This means the funding per VCET will go down if additional state funding is not received.

VCETs have not had an appreciable funding increase since 2021. In the past 4 years, the wages of officers and deputies have increased significantly not to mention the increased cost of vehicles, equipment, training, supplies, etc. Currently, VCETs across the state are having discussions on how to deal with no new funding.

At our local VCET, we receive \$194,000 of the state funding each year. We also have a per capita system that yields \$635,000 from the participating counties. We have a short fall of \$175,000. We are now using all of our forfeiture proceeds and reserve funds to fill in the gap.

VCETs are extremely important, especially in outstate MN, where individual Sheriff's Offices are unable to stand up their own drug investigative units. By working together, these VCETs are force multipliers and can be counted on not only for drug crimes but also as "first responders" to major events and violent crimes in each of the partner counties.

VCETs are the only way to get at the root cause of drug trafficking – drug dealers. While patrol officers and deputies can seize drugs, including large amounts, we really have difficulty proving that a particular offender is a dealer. The rock-solid way to identify and prosecute a dealer is to actually buy drugs from them, whether via an informant or undercover, both of which require specific training and equipment done by VCETs, not patrol officers.

Due to changes in sentencing guidelines and lighter sentences, we are seeing drug offenders back on the streets sooner. Many or most are right back to using and selling drugs, creating larger workloads and demand for VCETs.

Minnesota has made significant investments in drug-related societal issues and overdoses (harm reduction, fentanyl test kits, Narcan, etc.), but no appreciable increases have occurred on the front end – enforcement, which would address the root cause of drug issues and overdoses. VCETs have a huge return on investment. In 2024, there were \$5,189,200 distributed to all VCETs in Minnesota. The value of the drugs removed from the streets last year by these VCETs is over \$30 million. The detectives and agents on these VCETs do great work and care about their communities. They are vested in doing their best to keep these poisons off the streets and their communities safe.

I appreciate your attention in the matter and I am available should you have any questions.

Respectfully,



Brian Cruze
Meeker County Sheriff