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City Attorney Expands Efforts to Address Non-Violent Defendants' Health, Basic Needs Over Jail Time

COLUMBUS – Today, Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein announced the expansion of his office's efforts to identify the root causes of crimes and prioritize defendants' basic needs over jail time.

"We know that people often commit low-level, non-violent crimes because they don't have access to basic necessities," said Klein. "Someone who's hungry might steal to eat. Someone with underlying mental health needs might turn to drugs. If we address the root causes of crime, we can help meet people's needs and put them on a path forward without resorting to jail time. Our prosecutors already pursue non-jail alternatives, when appropriate, and we have expanded our efforts to provide them with more tools to help defendants. This is the only way to truly make our community safer and decrease crime."

When assessing non-violent offenses, City prosecutors will now review with defendants their areas of need, including employment, substance abuse treatment, health insurance, mental health services and transportation. Prosecutors, defendants and their attorneys may then work to create individualized plans to help defendants attain services. City prosecutors will consider these plans when resolving cases.

"We want to see people working and involved in the community. We don't want to see them in court," said Klein. "By taking a more holistic approach to working with those who have committed non-violent, low-level crimes, we can help those community members, improve public safety and focus on prosecuting violent crimes."

Last year, the City Attorney's office implemented the nation's first-of-its-kind theft diversion program to connect those accused of non-violent misdemeanor theft offenses to community services. Since last May, 63 Columbus residents have taken part in the program, which also connects them to basic needs, employment resources, and educational tools, among other necessities.

These initiatives are part of Klein's broader effort to comprehensively address fundamental inefficiencies and inequalities in the criminal justice system. Since taking office, the City Attorney has spearheaded efforts intended to prioritize jail space for violent offenders awaiting trial, save taxpayer money, and reduce the amount of time individuals spend in jail while awaiting trial for non-violent misdemeanor offenses. That also includes eliminating cash bail, ending the prosecution of low-level marijuana cases and not arresting non-violent defendants with warrants.

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