Legislation Details (With Text)

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File created:	2/8/2024		**In control:**	Committee on Public Safety	
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Title: Authorizing the City Council Committee on Public Safety to hold public hearings examining witness relocation policies in the City of Philadelphia as well as discuss strategies on creating a housing rehabilitation and witness relocation program that will allow for higher rates of witness attendance and an increase in the closure rate of homicide cases.

Sponsors: Councilmember Jones, Councilmember Harrity, Councilmember O'Rourke, Councilmember Brooks, Councilmember Landau, Councilmember Young, Councilmember Phillips, Councilmember Gauthier, Councilmember Lozada, Councilmember Thomas, Councilmember Squilla, Councilmember O'Neill, Councilmember Bass, Councilmember Driscoll

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Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result	Tally
2/8/2024	0	CITY COUNCIL	ADOPTED		
2/8/2024	0	CITY COUNCIL	Introduced and Ordered Placed on This Week's Final Passage Calendar		

Authorizing the City Council Committee on Public Safety to hold public hearings examining witness relocation policies in the City of Philadelphia as well as discuss strategies on creating a housing rehabilitation and witness relocation program that will allow for higher rates of witness attendance and an increase in the closure rate of homicide cases.

WHEREAS, The worst-kept secret in Philadelphia was that the Marriott in Center City used to house witnesses was across the street from the Criminal Justice Center. Witnesses would see suspects entering the Criminal Justice Center and would subsequently refuse to testify in court. This underscores one of the key issues with the criminal justice system in Philadelphia. In order to have successful prosecutions, we need witnesses to come forward. In today's "no-snitch" culture, that is extremely difficult; and

WHEREAS, There have been numerous reports of deaths as a result of witness intimidation and retaliation. In May of 2012, Rodney Ramseur was killed outside of his home less than a week after testifying in a murder trial. In 2012, Reina Aguirre Alonso, a witness in a murder case, was shot four times at point-blank range after she spoke with detectives about a shooting at Mutter and Westmorland Streets. When Sharif Derry was killed in 2015, a witness statement from the case was released online with cryptic comments about the consequences for "snitching."; and

WHEREAS, In 2022, four men were convicted in the 2011 killing of Kevin Drinks. Drinks was kept under surveillance for a full day by the four men who killed him later that evening. Unfortunately, Kevin's death was a case of mistaken identity. The four men believed that Kevin was a different individual who was scheduled to testify as a witness, when in reality he had nothing to do with the case. The District Attorney's Office was in the

process of investigating a separate case when they uncovered the coded language over a prison phone call that implicated the four in the murder; and

WHEREAS, Witness intimidation is not just seen in adult cases. In 2013, a teenager was charged with witness intimidation after he posted photos online of a victim and other investigative documents connected to an attempted shooting; and

WHEREAS, Social media has become a key outlet for witness intimidation. Instagram accounts such as "rats215" exposed more than 30 witnesses from February to November of 2013; and

WHEREAS, The recently released *Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia* makes witness relocation and protection a key focus. *The Blueprint* calls for the creation of an interagency, interstate, program where the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) renovates properties for witnesses to live in while preparing to testify in court. Once they have successfully testified, they can be relocated back to their original residence or to a location of their choosing. At that time, HUD will have identified dozens of other properties that they have begun rehabilitating to accommodate a new group of witnesses. This creates a "shell game" to keep witnesses protected and criminals in the dark; and

WHEREAS, Ensuring witness relocation ensures successful prosecutions. In order to accomplish this lofty goal, stakeholders such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the Administration, and the District Attorney's Office must come together and work with Council to adopt a program that will protect those who need it most; and

WHEREAS, In 2010, legislation was signed to prohibit the intimidation of witnesses, and it added a $2,000 penalty for violation. It is necessary that more money be appropriated at the City, state, and federal levels for witness relocation purposes; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby authorizes the City Council Committee on Public Safety to hold public hearings examining witness relocation policies in the City of Philadelphia as well as discuss strategies on creating a housing rehabilitation and witness relocation program that will allow for higher rates of witness attendance and an increase in the closure rate of homicide cases.

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