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Written Testimony—House Judiciary, Crime Subcommittee
Hearing on “Reimagining Public Safety in the COVID-19 Era”
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Good morning. I would like to begin by thanking you, Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Jordan, Members of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security as well as the other persons on this distinguished panel as we engage in dialogue on “Reimagining Public Safety in the COVID-19 Era.”

It goes without saying, violent crime across our nation is increasing, including in major cities like Houston.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have added to the stresses that create conditions that have led to increases in crime.

A month ago, on February 2, I announced the **One Safe Houston** plan, a comprehensive initiative aimed at holistically addressing public safety through community-wide efforts.

One Safe Houston is a \$44 million investment funded by the American Rescue Plan and focuses on four key areas:

- Violence Reduction and Crime Prevention
- Crisis Intervention, Response and Recovery
- Youth Outreach Opportunities
- Key Community Partnerships

Houston is the nation’s 4th largest city with 640 miles. We have 5,100 officers patrolling our streets, and that number is not enough.

Through One Safe Houston, we are putting 125 additional police officers on the streets each day using overtime. Our general fund

budget is funding five additional police cadet classes this fiscal year. Last week, I attended a graduation for 61 cadets, and they will add boots on the ground that we desperately need.

The use of technology is critically important and an area where we need more federal funding. The additional officers on patrol in Houston will be deployed primarily based on data driven, evidence-based analysis of when and where the most violent crimes are occurring and to provide more visibility toward crime deterrence and rapid response to crimes in progress. We have allowed **\$5.7 million** to this initiative.

There is no question there are too many guns on the streets. The city will invest **\$1 million in a robust gun buyback initiative** to remove more illegal or unwanted firearms from the street that could ultimately be used as crime gun

However, I firmly believe to combat violent crime, we will not be able to police our way out of these problems and that is why One Safe Houston is a holistic strategy.

Violent Crime is a public health crisis made worse by the pandemic. Domestic violence cases have more than doubled since 2019 and more people are experiencing mental health distress leading to interactions with police resulting in dangerous or deadly outcomes.

The state of Texas in its last legislative session passed HB 1927 which took effect on September 1 of last year—allowing unlicensed, or permit-less carry of a firearm—bypassing all training and safety precautions previously required to carry a concealed weapon. This irresponsible act alone has made policing much harder and adding too many guns on our streets.

Other factors contributing to this spike include widespread social anxiety, economic uncertainty, mental health concerns, the increased presence of illegally owned firearms, and particularly in

Houston, a strained court system plagued by criminal case backlogs that impact the pretrial release and prosecution of violent offenders.

Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, it is going to take all of us working collaboratively, from the federal government all the way down to local government to keep our nation's cities safe.

Specifically, the plan looks to address crisis intervention in two areas and I would like to highlight the following:

- Of the \$44 million plan, \$21 million has been allocated towards behavioral health programs, namely:
 - **Crisis Call Diversion Program (CCD)**—a 24-hour coverage program aimed at directly connecting callers with mental health providers
 - **Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT)** – deploying non-law enforcement teams of behavior health professionals to deal with non-violent interventions
 - **Crisis Intervention Response Teams (CIRT)** – specially trained police officers paired with a mental health professional deployed to mental health related interventions
 - **Clinician Officer Remote Evaluation (CORE)** – a tele-med program designed to give up to 80 officers immediate access to emergency access to behavioral health professionals

Keep in mind, as the largest city in a state that leads the nation in uninsured residents, we often ask police to respond to behavioral health situations. With the ARPA dollars provided by the Biden-Harris Administration, our police, clinicians, and behavioral health experts are better equipped with the tools and resources to respond to these situations.

Additionally, we have seen a substantial uptick in domestic violence related crimes that often lead to homicides. As a result, we have made an investment of \$10 million for sexual and domestic abuse responses through our Domestic Abuse Response Teams (DART) program.

- This program provides for specially trained, two-person mobile teams consisting of one HPD officer and one victim advocate responding to “high risk” domestic violence crime scenes at the request of the primary responding police unit trained to perform on-scene danger assessments.

At my direction and beyond the recommendations of the Commission’s report, the DART program has expanded to provide wrap around services to the victim, including housing and supportive services and targeted cultural outreach to communities as well as added forensic nurse services.

Other key components of the **One Safe Houston** initiative include:

- \$2.5 million for the implementation of the CURE Violence and credible messengers’ programs
- \$1 million investment to expand the existing successful community re-entry network program

As you may see, the programs we are investing in listen to and engage community and neighborhood leaders. It also provides opportunities to our youth.

Mr. Chairman, we are in a public health crisis, but I believe Houston is poised to lead the nation with a blueprint that addresses this crisis through law enforcement, public health practitioners and community partners working together. It will take all of us to address and reduce crime in our communities.

With the collaboration of all stakeholders, including business owners, faith-based leaders, and organizations that work with those experiencing family violence and mental illness, I am confident that we will reduce violence and emerge as **One Resilient City – One Unified City – One Safe Houston.**