

I. Baltimore OD deaths plummeted in 2024, but Black residents still bear the brunt of crisis (Mobtown Redux/Baltimore Beat)

Fatal overdoses plummeted in Baltimore last year, marking the lowest death toll in nearly a decade — but the crisis's disproportionate impact on Black residents remains a harsh reality.

Data released by the Maryland Department of Health last week showed Baltimore recorded 680 deaths in 2024, a 35% decrease from the year prior. Though the numbers are subject to change because they are preliminary, the significance of the decline has prompted both newfound optimism and a recognition that more work must be done amid a devastating, decades-long crisis.

“It’s great news; it’s great to see that,” said Danielle German, associate professor of health, behavior and society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “It’s not surprising to me given the amount of frontline work and harm reduction in particular that has taken place over these last several years, especially post-pandemic. The investment that has happened locally in these efforts that directly support people who are using drugs to stay safe have an impact.”

In part thanks to Baltimore’s unique, robust harm reduction infrastructure, the numbers may indicate Baltimore is turning a corner after establishing itself as the city with the highest fatal overdose rate in the nation. Experts have said that the city benefits from a large number of harm reduction organizations and a wide array of services for those who use drugs.

The last time Baltimore saw fewer than 700 overdose deaths was in 2016, when 694 deaths were recorded. That year marked the beginning of a massive surge in fatalities, with just 393 overdose deaths recorded in the year prior, according to state health department data.

“That’s an enormous decrease, and that’s a lot of lives that were saved,” said Dr. Eric Weintraub, a psychiatrist specializing in addiction who serves as associate director of the Kahlert Institute for Addiction Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. “I felt good because a lot of us who have been doing work in this area felt like we’ve been helping out but the numbers weren’t budging. We sort of rationalized it like it would be a lot worse if we weren’t doing what we were doing. To see a decrease like this makes us feel good about the work we’re doing, and that we’re contributing to this decrease we’re seeing.”

Both the city and state outpaced the decline seen nationally, where a decrease of 22% was reported in the 12-month period ending in August, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The dramatic decrease in deaths also comes with a notable decline in naloxone administered by EMS, which fell by nearly 28% in Baltimore last year. It's unclear why Baltimore saw that decrease, but it could indicate that either nonfatal overdoses are also decreasing or the life-saving medication could just be so widespread that emergency personnel are only carrying out a fraction of total revivals, experts said.

Last year's decline in deaths, the most significant drop in more than a decade, has been encouraging to experts. However, the data also underscores that Black Baltimoreans, specifically men, are hit hardest by the crisis — a manifestation of the impact of systemic racism and the decades-long drug war.

Black residents comprised 65% of all overdose deaths in 2024, according to the data. Black men specifically accounted for nearly half of all deaths, with those 55 years old or older being at the highest risk. The highest concentration of fatalities occurred in the city's Black Butterfly, majority Black neighborhoods in the eastern and western parts of the city.

Studies have shown that Black men are significantly more likely to die of overdoses, with fatal overdoses among the demographic increasing fourfold over the past decade nationally.

"I think the short answer is racism," German said. "If we within the city and within the country care about keeping people safe from fentanyl, we need to do that in a way that recognizes people's current realities — and in a way their current realities are impacted by the historical legacies of structural violence and such. It's scary to imagine we might be walking down a road where we wouldn't take that into account."

Minorities' lived experiences can impact their ability to get help as well, Weintraub said. "I think there's a couple things," Weintraub said. "One is a lack of trust from patients on whether the current care system is going to treat them fairly. And I think there's a lot of stigmatization within certain communities against certain types of treatment."

Weintraub added that other factors could be at play, such as whether certain communities have less access to treatment such as buprenorphine and methadone or are being treated differently by providers. He emphasized that there needs to be concerted efforts to bridge any gaps in treatment access and engage communities directly.

The existing health disparities remain a concern despite the decrease in overdose deaths. Experts also emphasize, however, that those who have fought to save lives amid the crisis cannot afford to get complacent.

The numbers being preliminary means that the actual death toll could be higher, as it can take months for causes of death to be determined by coroners. While Weintraub said he doesn't expect any significant increases in the finalized data, Baltimore's overdose death rate remains alarmingly high.

Baltimore's 2024 death rate was 116.1 deaths per 100,000 people when using 2020 U.S. Census data, dwarfing that of other counties and the statewide average, which came out to 25.1 per 100,000.

"The decrease in fatal overdoses that we're seeing in Maryland is historic, and it's proof that our investments in behavioral health and substance use care and the incredible efforts of people all around our state are paying off," Governor Wes Moore said in a statement. "However, we still have work to do. We are still losing far too many of our loved ones and neighbors to preventable overdoses, and we will not let up in our efforts to meet people where they are and make connections to care."

Experts have said for months they were cautiously optimistic about the trend of fatal overdoses, as prior data indicated Baltimore was beginning to follow the decline seen nationally. Overdose deaths decreased for the first time in five years in 2023, which many have at least partially attributed to ramped-up harm reduction efforts.

The Baltimore City Health Department, however, remains skeptical of the recent data as the city pursues litigation against opioid distributors to fund initiatives to tackle the overdose crisis.

"While these latest numbers showing a decrease in overdose deaths are incredibly encouraging, it is important to recognize both the fact that this is preliminary data and the complexity of the factors driving short-term changes," department spokesperson Blair Adams said in a statement. "We will continue to acknowledge the progress being made and, just as they have tirelessly done on a daily basis, Health Department staff, Baltimore's first-responders, and our community health providers and partners will continue their daily efforts to save lives."

Given the ongoing litigation, we will reserve any additional comments for the appropriate judicial form."

The ongoing lawsuit against McKesson and Cencora, formerly called AmerisourceBergen, could bring in as much as \$5.2 billion to fund the city's abatement plan to combat the overdose crisis. The plan includes increasing the city's treatment capacity, augmenting harm reduction initiatives and, perhaps most notably, opening overdose prevention centers.

Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge Lawrence P. Fletcher-Hill is expected to soon issue a ruling on whether the companies must cover the full costs of the city's abatement plan. Even if they are ordered to pay the city, it may not be for the full \$5.2 billion its lawyers have requested.

Baltimore is already slated to receive nearly \$670 million over the next 15 years from various settlements with opioid distributors and manufacturers. Officials and public health experts alike hope the money could bolster local harm reduction efforts.

That money could be crucial, as local harm reduction organizations have expressed fear that funding cuts and punitive drug policies under President Donald Trump could hinder their ability to continue fighting the crisis.

Trump recently struck fear into such nonprofits after ordering a federal funding freeze on grants and loans, a maneuver meant to force organizations to adhere to the nascent administration's far-right doctrines.

The Republican has also promised to ramp up law enforcement efforts to crack down on drugs and those who use them — an indicator he plans to escalate a drug war that has historically targeted Black Americans.

II. Baltimore's fatal overdose rate shows signs of slowing, prompting cautious optimism (Mobtown Redux/Baltimore Beat)

After a decade defined by a swelling death toll, the rate at which Baltimoreans are dying of overdoses may be slowing — a national phenomenon that's given hope amid a devastating crisis.

Baltimore saw 566 fatal overdose deaths as of September, according to preliminary data from the Maryland Department of Health. While a myriad of preventable deaths remain, the number puts the city on track to possibly end the year with fewer than 800 deaths, a significant drop compared to recent years.

The last time the city saw less than 800 deaths was in 2017, which preceded a pandemic-era surge in fatalities caused by the proliferation of fentanyl.

"It seems like overdoses are significantly lower this year than last year or other recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic," said Kenny Feder, assistant research professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Department of Mental Health. "And it's not just a Baltimore phenomenon."

The downward trend: The decline in fatal overdose rates has been mostly experienced in the eastern U.S., said Feder, who specializes in overdose prevention and health care for those who use drugs.

Last year, the country's fatal overdose numbers decreased for the first time in five years, though Baltimore's increased by 5.5% — marking a death toll of more than 1,000.

Now, however, Baltimore seems to be catching up as the decline becomes more significant.

The rebound comes after a "tragically high" surge in deaths that was worse than many thought was possible, Feder said. As extremely potent synthetic opioids rocked the drug market, deaths in Baltimore peaked in 2021, when the state reported 1,079 deaths.

Three years later, although the numbers are still relatively high — particularly in comparison to pre-pandemic levels — the new data shows the death rate may have reached its limit as fentanyl became the norm.

It's difficult to pinpoint just one reason for the decline, Feder said, although it seems to indicate that harm reduction initiatives are working.

Cities such as Baltimore have perhaps most importantly ramped up the distribution of naloxone, an opioid antagonist that is at the crux of strategies to prevent fatal overdoses.

Emergency service personnel administered the life-saving drug, which reverses overdoses, more than 1,600 times in Baltimore this year, according to the state health department.

Locally, the city and local harm reduction organizations have augmented their efforts. They've offered syringe service programs, or SSPs, as well as other resources such as naloxone distribution and training.

In tandem, they aim to reduce overdoses, prevent the spread of diseases such as HIV and help individuals access treatment, emphasizing a multifaceted approach to addressing the crisis.

"The thing is, those strategies are effective," Fedder said. "They were effective before overdoses went up as the saturation of fentanyl went up, and we need more of them. It's really positive we're seeing overdoses going down, and those strategies are still saving lives."

Caution about the numbers: Dr. Eric Weintraub, a psychiatrist specializing in addiction who serves as associate director of the Kahlert Institute of Addiction Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, cautioned that it may be too early to draw conclusions.

"I would say it's probably too early to tell," Weintraub said. "Generally, there's a six to eight-month lag between what you see in the actual data and when the medical examiners would be able to confirm all of the deaths."

Based on this, the more realistic number would be around 900 deaths, which would still mark a notable decrease from last year, he said. What's more certain is that the nation as a whole is seeing a decline.

Michael Coury, spokesman for the state's Office of Overdose Response, echoed Weintraub's caution about local data.

It's important to note that the data is preliminary, so numbers will likely grow as cases are confirmed, Coury said. Still, the data is encouraging and indicative of a downward trend after a concerted push by the state and local governments to tackle the crisis.

"Far too many people in Maryland continue to lose their lives every day to preventable overdoses, and Maryland is working to increase access to care for people with substance use disorders in every corner of the state," Coury said. "We're continuing to expand access to crisis services, for example, by investing over \$100 million to expand mobile crisis services and crisis stabilization centers."

Earlier this year, Gov. Wes Moore signed a budget with a 14% increase in funding for substance use disorder services alone. In total, \$1.4 billion was allocated for addiction and mental health programs.

Mayor Brandon Scott had similar priorities in his budget, including a 44% increase in funding for mental health and substance abuse programs.

The result has been a "robust" harm reduction infrastructure in Baltimore, Coury said. Statewide, programming is also up, with most counties offering SSPs, naloxone programs and other resources.

Roadblocks remain: The investments reflect a dedication to driving overdose deaths down. But that's not to say that experts and public officials expect this year's downward trend to remain consistent, as numerous roadblocks remain.

"We cannot afford to be complacent in our efforts to save lives," Coury said.

In addition to the stigma surrounding drug use itself, barriers to treatment and life-saving medications still exist, whether it be because they're illegal or not done in practice.

For example, overdose prevention centers, which permit people to use drugs in-house alongside medical professionals, are largely illegal in the U.S. This comes despite the fact they have been proven to reduce overdose deaths.

And, even though pandemic-era laws made it easier to prescribe and distribute medications for opioid use disorder such as methadone and buprenorphine, which have been proven to improve health outcomes, many still go without access.

That is particularly true among minority groups, who are hardest hit by health disparities. That fact is manifested in Baltimore's death toll, as a majority of deaths are

Black residents. Data shows that deaths are most concentrated in the city's "Black Butterfly."

"I think some of the patients we see in Baltimore are marginalized from the mainstream health care system and so a lot of these individuals, because of a lack of trust in the system, don't do well in brick-and-mortar treatment," Weintraub said. "We need to make an effort to meet them where they are."

The issues are compounded by the fact that, while the drug supply has always been an issue because Baltimore is a port city and has in the past served as a hub for trafficking, the supply is getting increasingly more toxic.

That's become evident with the proliferation of xylazine, a tranquilizer that's often mixed with fentanyl and is resistant to naloxone. Nitazenes, a stronger form of synthetic opioids, have also become more prevalent.

"This is a major emerging threat to all people who use drugs," Feder said, adding it's unclear how they will impact death rates in the future.

The future of the crisis: Although barriers remain, The data indicating a potential for a notably low death toll in 2024 places the city at a key juncture in the overdose crisis — and in its mission to address it.

The crisis has killed more than 8,000 Baltimore residents in the past decade, and the city's death rate remains the highest in the nation, coming in at 144.4 deaths per 100,000 people, based on 2020 U.S. Census data.

That quadruples Maryland's average while dwarfing the death rates of other counties.

For Baltimore to end the year with less than 800 overdose deaths, its death rate would have to remain steady, despite some studies indicating an increase in fatalities during colder months.

To ramp up harm reduction efforts, the city is in hot pursuit of funds to continue to drive numbers down through litigation against opioid manufacturers and distributors over their role in the crisis.

The Baltimore City Health Department declined to comment, citing the litigation.

Baltimore is already slated to receive about \$400 million from five settlements, more than \$100 million of which has been earmarked for opioid remediation efforts. Ongoing litigation against McKesson and Censora, formerly called AmerisourceBergen, could bring in significantly more.

The windfall of funds will drastically bolster funding for overdose prevention initiatives and other harm reduction measures, officials have said. That comes on top of historic investments already included in the state and city's most recent budgets.

Although not much has been said beyond that as officials look to prevent hurting their chances in court, they've expressed confidence in putting funds through a governance structure to ensure they're used most effectively.

Officials are now waiting to see just how much money they can obtain to fill their war chest against the crisis. And the city will have to wait to see whether the trend of declining overdoses is sustained.

III. Baltimore has the highest overdose death rate in the nation. How did it get here? (Mobtown Redux)

For those who use drugs, Baltimore is the deadliest city in America — the grim result of an unprecedented overdose crisis plaguing what locals call "Charm City."

In fact, it surpasses every other city in the nation for its overdose death rate by a long shot, according to an analysis by the San Francisco Chronicle. The newspaper cites data covering the 12-month period ending in June 2023, when Baltimore saw 183.2 deaths per 100,000 people.

About 87% of the deaths were attributed to fentanyl, a synthetic opioid significantly more potent than heroin. But that's not the only factor driving a surge in fatalities.

"There has been an increase in demand for street drugs in recent years due to the COVID pandemic's impact on access to treatment, social isolation, and the increased cost of living," said Jennifer Martin, deputy director for Baltimore City Health Department's Division of Population Health and Disease Prevention.

The pandemic created a myriad of challenges for Americans. People lost work, crimes such as domestic violence increased and isolation exacerbated mental health conditions.

In addition, housing costs went up, and access to social services decreased. As COVID-related aid expired, some were forced into homelessness.

All of these challenges dealing with what experts call social determinants of health have repeatedly been proven to increase fatal overdose rates.

The Chronicle's list ranking overdose death rates is composed of counties and independent cities with 500,000 or more people. Behind Baltimore, Philadelphia had the second-highest fatal overdose rate, with 90 deaths per 100,000 people.

The newspaper also compared all jurisdictions that saw at least 10 overdose deaths. In that list, Baltimore fell only behind McDowell County, West Virginia, a small area of just more than 18,000 people that reported 207.3 deaths per 100,000.

The data used by the newspaper isn't, however, the most recent that's available — at least concerning Baltimore. Since that data was published, Baltimore saw a modest decrease in its overdose death rate.

Baltimore had 174.1 deaths per 100,000 people in the 12-month period ending September 2023, according to an analysis by The Long Haul using data from Maryland's Office of Overdose Response.

With 1,020 total deaths during that period, the number marked a 5.6% increase over the year prior. The city's death toll comprises about half of all overdose fatalities in Maryland, but it accounts for only 9.5% of its population.

For many, opioid addiction began with opioids that were once prescribed by a doctor for pain relief, Martin said.

As they became too costly, though, a significant number of people eventually opted for cheaper — and stronger — drugs such as heroin, studies have shown.

Enter fentanyl, which is generally considered to have cemented its role in the overdose crisis in 2013. The powerful drug, often sold in gel capsules for just a few dollars, prompted the most significant spike in overdose deaths around 2020.

The flow of fentanyl into the U.S. increased and more countries began trafficking it around that same time, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration noted in a report titled "Fentanyl Flow to the United States."

Paired with the devastating impact of the pandemic, the increased fentanyl supply led the death rate to swell. With resources already strained, the stigma surrounding addiction further hindered efforts to help those in need.

In a vacuum, all of these variables create an environment that fosters drug abuse. But they also may be compounded by Baltimore's lengthy history of racial inequality, said Emily Keller, special secretary of the Maryland Office of Overdose Response.

"I don't think that Baltimore got over it," Keller said. "They put certain populations in certain places in the city. And now the government is having to undo 100 years of disparities. I do think they're making great strides."

Baltimore to this day is reckoning with its history of segregation and redlining, which began in the 1930s. Both have created conditions that increase the likelihood of drug abuse among disadvantaged populations.

Through acts such as redlining, Black Baltimoreans were denied services available to the white population. This not only prevented them from obtaining loans and finding housing, but it also led to poor health outcomes.

To this day, the effects of those policies still linger — and the number of consequences are seemingly endless.

The most recent data from the city health department shows that, between 1999 and 2021, Black males aged 45 years and older accounted for a majority of overdose deaths.

The Chronicle's data, however, shows that the demographics may have shifted in more recent years.

In the 12-month period ending June 2023, white individuals had a slightly higher death rate than Black individuals, with 201 per 100,000 compared to 192.9 per 100,000, respectively.

Even so, concentrations of overdose deaths in Baltimore have been found largely in impoverished, majority-Black neighborhoods located in what's known as the "Black Butterfly."

"Based on EMS data related to nonfatal overdose calls BCHD obtains through a data use agreement, we know that we see clusters of nonfatal overdoses routinely in the Penn North/Reservoir Hill, Upton/Druid Heights, Sandtown-Winchester, and Southwest Baltimore neighborhoods," Martin said.

Addressing these inequalities takes money — and lots of it. Both city and state officials have agreed that funding remains one of the largest roadblocks in solving the overdose crisis.

"I think the roadblock is always money," Keller said. "While there have been significant increases in access to funding and significant increases that Gov. Moore has put into place, is there ever enough? Can you put a price on a human life?"

With all of this being said, the data and history of how Baltimore became the epicenter of the country's overdose crisis may portray a grim picture.

Baltimore is "easy to point to" when looking for evidence of the overdose crisis, and the numbers accurately portray just that, Keller said.

However, those statistics tend to overshadow the work being done at the state and local level, which have focused on harm reduction, she added.

At least due in part to these efforts, the state as a whole has made progress in saving lives. That's particularly true between mid-2021 and late 2022, when the state saw a notable decrease in its death rate.

The most recent data also shows that a majority of counties in Maryland saw a decrease in overdose deaths.

In total, there were 2,053 overdose deaths in Maryland in the year-long period ending in September 2023, with 81% of those being fentanyl-related.

Meanwhile, state and city officials haven't rested on their laurels.

Gov. Wes Moore last month unveiled a proposed budget with a record-high \$1.4 billion in state aid for mental health and substance abuse services. He also created the Office of Overdose Response in December to collaborate with agencies throughout the state to address the overdose crisis.

Most recently, the governor has been traveling the state to tout the ENOUGH Act which, if passed, would provide millions of dollars for communities that can demonstrate they have viable pathways to combat poverty.

Mayor Brandon Scott said in a statement that such legislation could be a game changer in Baltimore, where about one in five residents live in poverty.

"We know that, while (addiction) can impact people of any socioeconomic background, addiction often disproportionately impacts communities that have been historically disinvested in," Scott said. "We will continue our work in this area to address addiction as a public health issue, and hopefully soon will have the added support of the ENOUGH Act to help."

There are other reasons to be hopeful, officials say.

For example, Scott last month signed legislation to create more affordable housing. Baltimore has also implemented harm reduction strategies such as needle exchange programs, vaccine clinics and naloxone training.

Test strips for fentanyl and xylazine, a tranquilizer that's resistant to naloxone and often mixed with the synthetic opioid, are provided by the city.

In addition, the city has increased access to buprenorphine treatment, opened stabilization centers and created a peer support program at local libraries to connect addicts with resources.

"I think there's a lot to be hopeful for," Keller said. "Obviously, the numbers have been devastating to all of us. And I know Baltimore has really struggled. But the pieces are starting to come together."

IV. Auditor to review sale of Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly's land for possible conflict after homeless encampment cleared (The Chattanooga Times Free Press)

Chattanooga's internal audit office will review whether a conflict of interest took place when the city helped empty out a homeless encampment from property owned by Mayor Tim Kelly as he prepared to sell it.

The city told the Times Free Press about the audit on Friday, at the end of a week during which a reporter asked about the displacement of the homeless encampment this year on the former Southern Honda Powersports location on Workman Road. Kelly owned the property until selling it for more than \$2.7 million on Nov. 29. After defending the cleanup effort most of the week, officials on Friday evening said the audit office would review the matter.

"To ensure public confidence and to further demonstrate the Kelly administration's commitment to transparency, the mayor has asked the Office of Internal Audit to review and affirm the independent request in question," said spokesperson Mary Beth Ikard in a statement.

The mayor's office did not make Kelly available for an interview despite a request from the Times Free Press.

The sale came three months after the city cleared the encampment in August, according to emails obtained by the Times Free Press.

The issue of the homeless camp goes back at least to the spring, the documents indicate. In a May 11 email, Donna Casteel, the city's chief code enforcement inspector, mentioned Kelly by name in discussing the property.

"There's a homeless camp on Tim Kelly's property at Workman Road," she wrote. "He has been nice enough to provide them with portable toilets and a dumpster, but we're receiving litter complaints."

Casteel added that the city would try to satisfy the complainants "without disturbing the camp."

Cassie O'Neill, program manager at the city's homeless services division, in a June 24 email then asked city officials if citations had been issued.

"I would like to take this opportunity to ask that we have a bigger conversation about how Codes and Homeless Services can work together better in these situations," O'Neill said.

Later that day, Casteel responded, saying that citations had not been issued and the city had actively been working to make improvements at the encampment.

During a string of emails that noted complaints about the property over the following months, officials had been actively discussing relocating the homeless population to a Super 8 motel.

On Aug. 24, O'Neill wrote to officials saying the encampment had been cleared, although some individuals may still be in the area.

Kelly, known for his string of successful businesses such as Southern Honda Powersports and Kelly Subaru, was elected in April. During the campaign, Kelly said he would put all of his businesses in blind trusts to avoid conflicts of interest if he were to be elected.

"I plan to put them in a blind trust to prevent (or at least mitigate) conflicts of interests," Kelly wrote in a Reddit "ask me anything" post last year. "I hold myself to the highest ethical standards and I am NOT doing this as a way to enrich myself, but hopefully rather to enrich and empower more Chattanoogaans."

City officials have said that property owners have the right to request homeless encampments to be displaced. Ikard and Sam Wolfe, the city's director of homelessness and supportive housing, said the process was the same as if any other property owner were to request an encampment be displaced.

"We like to encourage people to give them two weeks from the first notice they need to vacate the property to kind of move somewhere else that gives them time to get their belongings and refer them to services," Wolfe said.

Ikard specifically said that the mayor had nothing to do with his businesses during the time period and that the reason for clearing the property was that it was going to be sold.

"With Workman, the mayor has divested himself of his business ties — he has a firewall," she said during a Monday interview. "I think in that case, it was that the property was going to be sold."

The Times Free Press suggested in a follow-up question that the sale itself might present a conflict, as the city's removal of a homeless camp might increase the value of the mayor's personal property. Ikard responded by text on Friday: "If the TFP has any questions about any of those businesses with which he was previously involved, please feel free to contact those businesses."

Later that day, the Times Free Press asked Ikard for a direct interview with the mayor. No response was given, but later that evening, Joda Thongnopnua, the mayor's chief of staff, called a reporter and then declined to speak on the record.

The Hamilton County Register Of Deeds Office said there is no record of a blind trust, and the city did not provide proof of any such trust when asked.

David Carmody, who took over as CEO of Southern Honda Powersports and Kelly's other companies as the mayor distanced himself from business involvement, said that's because Kelly's businesses have not yet been put into a blind trust. Rather, he said, the marketing agency Chattanooga Workshop — which advertises his companies — is transforming into an "independent management company" to oversee the mayor's prior business dealings.

"We're working on that right now, on the blind trust," Carmody said, adding that executives hope to put the businesses into a trust by early 2022. "All of the entities will need to go into that trust."

The register of deeds office supplied documentation that the land sale transaction for the Workman Road property was executed by Kelly's own signature on Nov. 29 to sell the property to a company called 1394 Workman LLC. The Times Free Press was unable to find contact information for the company.

Carmody said the request to remove the homeless encampment had nothing to do with Kelly, even though Kelly was the one who was selling the property and signed off on the deal.

"He had no idea we were even thinking of this," Carmody said, adding that the main issue was littering that had led to code enforcement citations.

Southern Honda Powersports is the largest Honda motorcycle dealership in the country with \$35 million in sales in 2020 from the sale of more than 3,000 units. The dealership has moved to East Ridge, leaving the Workman Road property behind.

Wendy Winters, executive director of the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition, said the process of working to vacate the encampment went smoothly.

In total, just shy of 20 residents were relocated. The remaining residents migrated elsewhere at their own discretion.

"We work very closely with the city's office of homelessness and supportive services," Winters said. "All the residents were notified in advance."

V. Report finds Hamilton County district attorney general violated Tennessee nepotism law (The Chattanooga Times Free Press)

Investigators for the Tennessee Comptroller's Office have found that Hamilton County District Attorney General Neal Pinkston was violating state nepotism law by employing his wife and her brother.

Hours after the report was released Wednesday, Pinkston announced in a statement that two employees in his office had been put on leave and that he is "reviewing the recommendations of the comptroller's office and may have additional comments at a later date."

His office declined to specify whether the leave was paid or unpaid.

The report signed by Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumpower states that investigators in his office determined the employment of Chief of Staff Melydia Clewell, Pinkston's wife, and her brother, investigator Kerry Clewell, was in violation of the Tennessee State Employees Uniform Nepotism Policy Act.

The act states that "no state employees who are relatives shall be placed within the same direct line of supervision whereby one relative is responsible for supervising the job performance or work activities of another relative."

A county district attorney is a position established by the state and is considered a state agency, which therefore makes any employee in the office considered a state employee, according to the report.

The relationships first came to light in May 2021 when county Commissioner Tim Boyd asked at a budget hearing whether Pinkston employed any relatives with county funds. Pinkston answered no.

The Times Free Press then reported that Pinkston had married a subordinate, Melydia Clewell, and hired her brother, Kerry Clewell.

"Since the chief of staff was hired in March 2015, and the DAG investigator was hired in August 2020, it appears that the salaries for both the chief of staff and the DAG investigator positions were paid through state budget appropriations," the report states.

State Sen. Todd Gardenhire, R-Chattanooga, during an interview in his legislative office on Wednesday, said that he was the one who requested the investigation.

"I'm sad that it had to come to this," Gardenhire said. "It's a shame that General Pinkston drew this out like he did when he had many people telling him that it was wrong. He had to have known it was wrong or he wouldn't have snuck out of town and kept his marriage secret and then quietly tried to play games with shifting resources to cover up his obvious, flagrant violation of that particular law."

Pinkston married Melydia Clewell — first hired as a public information officer and later promoted to chief of staff — in November 2019 in Marion County. Perhaps because the union took place in a neighboring county, the union did not draw attention in Hamilton County until the Times Free Press reported on it in 2021.

From the beginning, Pinkston denied wrongdoing, saying his management decisions "are both legal and ethical." He then transferred the relatives to the county portion of his payroll instead of the state portion, in an effort to remove them from the shadow of state nepotism laws.

The state report seems to indicate that remedy is inadequate.

"The DAG's office transferred the funding source for the chief of staff and the DAG investigator from state to county government after receiving an inquiry from an outside entity," the report states. "All employees of the DAG's office are considered state employees regardless of the funding source of their salaries."

In a Wednesday phone interview, Boyd said the best thing for Pinkston to do is "resign and take his wife and brother-in-law with him."

"It makes me very pleased that the comptroller's investigation showed the same conclusions that I had made," Boyd said. "It reinforces the fact that nobody's above the law, and it's a sad case that our DA thinks he is, and in fact, is on record telling the public that he was not in violation of any laws. He just lied to the people. If he didn't know the law, why's he the DA? If he knew the law, why didn't he know he was in violation of it?"

Pinkston has suggested that Boyd was motivated to press the staffing issue by a 2018 indictment in which Pinkston tried to prosecute Boyd for allegedly threatening a political opponent with damaging information if he didn't drop out of the race. The charges were later dismissed.

Both Melydia and Kerry Clewell received raises after being transferred to the county payroll. Melydia Clewell's raise was from \$87,948 a year to \$91,000. Kerry Clewell's was from \$48,992 to \$50,600 a year.

However, the report notes that the investigators found no appearance of favoritism in their salary levels.

The comptroller compared raises for Melydia Clewell to four other employees between 2015 and 2021. Clewell saw a 61% salary increase, with the four other employees averaging about a 55% increase.

"Nepotism statutes and policies are designed to avoid conflicts of interest and to reduce favoritism or the appearance of favoritism," the report said. "Although the DAG's office is in violation of the Nepotism Act, comptroller investigators did not find any evidence of favoritism regarding salary increases for the chief of staff as compared to other administrative staff within the office for the period reviewed. Comptroller investigators could not determine if any other types of favoritism were given to the relatives of the DAG."

The report's release comes amid a heated primary campaign between Pinkston and fellow Republican Coty Wamp, who serves as general counsel for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office and has criticized Pinkston for employing family members. The election is May 3.

"The District Attorney has proven time and time again that he either doesn't know the law or simply doesn't care about it," Wamp said in a statement. "Hiring family members to work directly underneath you is not only a violation of state law, which one would assume is of the utmost importance to an elected district attorney, it is also a violation of public trust."

"When elected, I will use the salary of the DA's wife and brother-in-law to create new prosecutorial positions," she said. "A prosecutor dedicated to gang and violent crime and a prosecutor dedicated to child sex abuse cases are two of my first priorities when I get in office. This behavior is the epitome of why the public has lost faith and trust in government. The findings from the comptroller are disappointing but not surprising."

When the Times Free Press first broke the story about Pinkston's relatives, one question his office did not answer was about the line of supervision in the office — who supervised whom. According to the state report, Pinkston told the state that other people in the office supervised his relatives — not the DA himself. According to the state report, that line of response did not ease the nepotism concern.

"The DAG has ultimate responsibility for and is in control of his office and the employees within his office. Comptroller investigators were advised that the chief of staff is supervised by the executive administrator in the DAG's office, and the DAG investigator is supervised by an assistant district attorney general," the report said. "The DAG cannot evade the prohibitions set forth in the act by shifting supervisory responsibility to other members of the office because both the executive administrator and the assistant district attorney general are ultimately supervised by the DAG and therefore remain in his direct line of supervision."

The report concludes, "The 11th Judicial District Attorney General should resolve the violation of the Nepotism Act within his office by means of transfer of the chief of staff and the DAG investigator to another governmental entity or termination of their employment."

Copies of the report were forwarded to Gov. Bill Lee and Tennessee Attorney General Herbert Slatery, the report states.

VI. 'This is a war': Doug Mastriano's ties to election deniers and the Jan. 6 insurrection (York Dispatch)

Doug Mastriano was primed and ready to hand down subpoenas to three counties, including York, in order to gain access to voting machines as part of his quest to audit the 2020 election.

A date was set amid a flurry of activity behind the scenes as the counties and state Republican leaders responded to the provocation: Aug. 6.

Then ... nothing.

Mastriano, a relatively obscure Army vet-turned-state senator who quickly built a national following as an election denier since he took office two years ago, was the first to break the silence.

Last week, he referred to a mysterious betrayal in a statement issued on Facebook, his platform of choice, and claimed his audit push had "been weakened and diminished."

"We're not in a very good spot right now," he said. "I put my name out there to get it done, and I've been stopped for the time being. If there's a way I could do it without being stopped, a way around this momentary impediment, you know I would find it."

That, in turn, prompted a somewhat uncommonly frank response from Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman, R-Centre, who put the blame squarely on Mastriano's shoulders.

"It is discouraging to realize that he was only ever interested in politics and showmanship and not actually getting things done," Corman said.

Neither responded to requests for comment.

For those not directly involved in the spat — or closely following it via right-wing media — it's easy to dismiss as political squabbling. But Mastriano is now a major figure in the universe of far-right supporters of former President Donald Trump, boasting his own growing contingent of loyalists and a platform that puts him in direct conflict with state GOP leadership. For comparison's sake, Corman has just over 6,000 Facebook followers compared with Mastriano's nearly 180,000.

And the latest rebuff by leadership hardly put an end to the audit push.

Instead, Mastriano and his followers have gone on the offensive, continuing to spread false information and innuendo about the legitimacy of the 2020 election. Meanwhile, a mysterious faction calling itself an “election integrity committee” had reportedly been knocking on doors in Lancaster and York counties.

“This is a war,” said Toni Shuppe, a founder of Audit the Vote PA, in a recent video posted to the messaging app Telegram, where many far-right election deniers gather.

It’s not clear how closely Mastriano and these groups are aligned — there are no obvious financial ties — but the Franklin County lawmaker has repeatedly appeared at their rallies and is a dominant presence on their social media feeds.

The message and the messenger: Ten months after the 2020 presidential election, Mastriano and fringe groups loyal to Trump's cause are still demanding the election be audited despite widespread consensus it was legitimate.

However, while Mastriano and the groups have no issue holding rallies and spreading baseless claims about election fraud on social media, they share a common theme: a refusal to speak with the media despite their claims they are fighting for transparency.

Nick Anspach, assistant professor of political science at York College, said that it could be that transparency isn’t Mastriano's and the organizations’ goals. Rather, he said, it could just be to boost name recognition.

“It seems self-defeating,” Anspach said. “But at the same time, it seems a bit disingenuous that those arguing for greater transparency in the electoral process don't want that transparency process with the media.”

Mastriano, who assumed office in 2019 after handily winning a special election, has become a polarizing figure in Pennsylvania politics.

The divisive incumbent easily won reelection after an uncontested primary in 2020 and has taken the helm of a movement to challenge the results of a presidential election even many in his own party accepted long ago.

Until recently, Mastriano served as the chairman of the Senate Intergovernmental Operations Committee.

He did not respond to requests for comment, nor has he ever responded to inquiries for comment from The York Dispatch since he assumed office.

A devout Christian and retired U.S. Army colonel, Mastriano had no problem winning over voters in the deep-red 33rd Senate District, which includes Hanover as well as West Manheim and Penn townships. It also includes all of Adams County and part of Franklin County.

In November, during a Senate Majority Policy Committee meeting in Gettysburg, Trump's legal team, including his attorney Rudy Giuliani, participated in the meeting to support baseless claims of fraud.

Trump also participated by phone.

Mastriano's personal Twitter account was suspended two days later, prompting Trump to tweet "Wow! Twitter bans highly respected Pennsylvania State Senator Doug Mastriano after he did a great job of leading a hearing on the 2020 Election fraud. They and the Fake News, working together, want to SILENCE THE TRUTH. Can't let that happen. This is what Communist countries do!"

Days later, during a meeting with Trump, Mastriano had to leave abruptly after learning he had tested positive for COVID-19, The Associated Press reported.

Now-Senate Majority Leader Kim Ward, who sat next to Mastriano during the public meeting he had organized, also later tested positive.

Not media friendly: In an attempt to find out more about the organization Free PA, The York Dispatch attended an Aug. 7 meeting at Wisheaven Banquet Hall in Windsor Township that featured Mastriano as a speaker.

Upon entering the building, a vendor could be seen selling pro-Donald Trump and anti-President Joe Biden apparel. One sticker read "Trump is still our president."

A reporter and photographer were kicked out of the location within 10 minutes of entering the building, which had a "no media" sign on the front door. On its website, most of its meetings state media is not permitted.

After being told to leave, the reporter asked why the organization doesn't allow media. A woman volunteer in a Free PA shirt said that it was a private meeting and "that is no discussion."

"You can leave now, please. Goodbye," she said, prompting applause from some in the building.

Mastriano's audience: At rallies and committee meetings, Mastriano often refers to Democrats as puppets hoping to turn America's democratic system into a Communist society. All the while, he has cited scripture and used the term "patriot" — often associated with his military service — to brand himself.

During his 2019 special election run, he sent out a number of Islamophobic messages. "Islam wants to kill gay rights, Judaism, Christianity and pacifism," one such Facebook post read.

More than a year later, the senator blasted local clergy and accused the religious leaders of being corrupted by leftist ideologies and "denying" the power of Christ. He promptly deleted the post.

That kind of rhetoric has made him a darling of right-wing broadcasters Newsmax and One America News Network. And the relationship is reciprocal: The networks amplify Mastriano's message without any scrutiny and he shares their reporting back to his followers.

For example, he recently shared an OANN report critical of Corman and other GOP leadership on his Facebook page, writing: “The details of who stalled the audit in Pennsylvania.”

Along the way, Mastriano has been embraced by a number of fringe groups.

His followers at rallies have often declined to be named, but data from the Department of State paints a clearer picture of who his followers are — including those charged in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Mastriano helped organize bus rides for Trump supporters on Jan. 6 to protest the election results, but he claimed to have left before the riots became violent.

State Department data shows that two of those who were charged in the U.S. Capitol riots have donated to the senator’s campaign since 2019: Sandra Weyer, of Mechanicsburg, Dauphin County, and Donald Smith, of Hanover. Both face multiple felonies related to the insurrection.

Weyer was arrested June 28 and has a status hearing set for Sept. 8. She has donated \$500 to Mastriano’s campaign since 2019.

Smith was arrested July 29. He has donated \$1,000 to the senator’s campaign during that same time period.

The lawmaker also has a close relationship with Audit the Vote PA and Free PA, two groups that appear to work in conjunction to rally election denialists in York County and beyond. Leaders of both groups did not respond to requests for comment.

It’s not obvious who is funding the two groups. Neither is registered as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit.

In a video on the messaging app Telegram shortly after Mastriano's recent news release, Shuppe urged supporters to "ignore the chaos" and said that additional information would be coming soon.

"We're exhausted, we're in a battle, this is a war, but it's going to be OK," she said.

A trip to Arizona ... and the governor’s residence?: Amid the Mastriano subpoena spat, Corman named a successor to lead the audit going forward: state Sen. Chris Dush, a Republican from Cameron County.

Dush and Mastriano have been close allies.

Earlier this year, Dush, Mastriano and Franklin County Republican state Rep. Rob Kauffman all visited Arizona to see how an audit there was playing out. It was, at least according to Dush, his idea to travel more than 2,000 miles to observe the process and take notes that could help the efforts in Pennsylvania.

Local and national media had "blasted" the three politicians as they entered the Veterans Memorial Coliseum at the state fairgrounds for its audit of Maricopa County's election results, he said.

"(The media) tried to ambush us, but the Arizona rangers prevented that from happening," Dush said. "But we expressed there was going to be a chance to ask us questions after we saw what was going on. But they never (availed) themselves to the opportunity."

The turmoil within the Republican party has led some to question the future of Mastriano's planned election audits in Philadelphia, Tioga and York counties. All three counties so far haven't allowed Mastriano and his committee access to their equipment. Likewise, any allegations of fraud have repeatedly been proven false.

Dush said the Senate Intergovernmental Operations Committee has the votes to at least subpoena documents related to the 2020 election. But considering the Department of State decertified Fulton County's voting machines after they were made available to outside parties for inspection, further subpoenas could be delayed until at least November.

Dush, for his part, declined to comment on Mastriano's personality or his burgeoning feud with GOP leadership.

Kauffman did not respond to requests for comment.

The recent internal GOP friction hasn't slowed Mastriano's ascent, with recent rumors of a gubernatorial bid in 2022.

State Sen. Anthony Williams, D-Delaware, who serves as the minority chair on Mastriano's committee, said Mastriano's tactics likely foreshadow such a run.

"I do know what he's trying to create," Williams said. "A circus for his own political gain. But he's dragged a lot of Republicans with him. It's only about his only political gain."

While Mastriano has developed a close following in the hothouse environment of far-right social media, it's unclear how much support he can expect from moderate Republicans and independents.

Calls by lawmakers to audit the 2020 election have permeated throughout a significant portion of the U.S., particularly among Republicans, according to a Monmouth University poll in June.

In the poll surveying 801 adults with a 3.5% margin of error, 57% of those surveyed reported calls for an audit were partisan efforts to undermine valid election results.

Meanwhile, 33% called the concerns legitimate because of potential irregularities. The results, however, showed a strong partisan divide.

About 61% of Republicans and right-leaning individuals said the audits were legitimate, according to the poll. Among all other respondents, just 14% agreed that they were legitimate.

There has been no evidence of irregularities in Pennsylvania's election, nor in Arizona, where Maricopa County turned records over to a third-party audit.

VII. Gaps in oversight law put Pa. children at risk; DA calls for holding people accountable (The York Dispatch/Spotlight PA)

For months beginning in late 2018, parents in one of the Boy Scout troops in York County exchanged emails raising an alarming complaint: applications for a series of required background checks for some of the troop's volunteers were missing.

At least one of them — a scoutmaster who had attended an overnight trip — did not have up-to-date clearances on file at all, according to the emails, which were obtained by The York Dispatch and Spotlight PA.

“We have several active leaders (6) overseeing the activities and protection of our troop who require formal clarification of their standing as it relates to their clearances to do so,” parents of a Scout in one of the York troops wrote in September of that year.

A committee chair for the troop later responded to the concerns, writing, “I am incredibly disturbed by this situation.”

In response to the devastating Penn State child sexual abuse scandal, the state Legislature passed landmark reforms that, as of 2015, required anyone working with children — including volunteers — to undergo a series of background checks.

The goal was to prevent those with certain criminal records or a history of abuse from gaining access to minors through youth programs.

Now, five years after the law took effect, there are signs it isn't working as intended, and organizations are able to skirt the rules and face few, if any, consequences, according to a two-month review by the news organizations.

For groups such as the Boy Scouts and others that are not already regulated by the state, there is no official oversight of whether they are complying with the law, and problems only become apparent if someone complains or a child is harmed. That makes it impossible to know how many groups may be falling short of the requirements.

The problems extend beyond York County. Documents obtained under a public records request show complaints to the Department of Human Services from all corners alleging volunteers lack clearances.

Violations can be prosecuted by local district attorneys, but none have brought such a case since the law took effect, according to state court records.

“Is this an issue? A hundred percent,” York County District Attorney Dave Sunday said in an interview. “Is this something that needs to be worked through and figured out, and do people need to be held accountable? Yes.”

The law requires anyone working with children in the public, private or nonprofit sector, including volunteers, to undergo a criminal background check by Pennsylvania State Police and a child abuse clearance by the Department of Human Services. Some are also required to get a third check by the FBI. The clearances are good for 60 months and must be on file with the organization before volunteers start their work.

The mandate was hailed as a major step forward in protecting children, and few question the value of it. But, as those in York County and elsewhere have found, its effectiveness relies on trust — not actual enforcement.

“There is a good-faith presumption written directly in (the law) that these groups are required to obtain and maintain clearances,” said Amy Grippi, acting deputy secretary and child services executive director for the Human Services Department.

Grippi said entities already regulated by the state, such as day cares and residential homes for children, are regularly checked to ensure they are properly collecting and keeping clearances on file as part of annual inspections.

But overseeing other private and nonprofit groups that are not already subject to state oversight would be a major undertaking and require more resources.

“There are probably thousands of such programs and services,” said Grippi, adding that one line of defense for parents concerned about their child’s safety is to directly ask youth groups about their policies on clearances.

LOST APPLICATIONS

The emails obtained by the news organizations show that was the case last year with the Boy Scouts' New Birth of Freedom Council, which covers portions of southcentral Pennsylvania, including the York region.

The council has 9,000 youth members and has more than 3,500 registered adult volunteers.

The emails describe how clearance applications, which contain sensitive information such as Social Security numbers, for the York-based troop had been lost or misplaced, and how volunteers had overseen children without clearances on file.

The documents show at least three people with leadership positions in the York County troop contacted the New Birth of Freedom Council's top staff to report missing clearances and volunteers who should never have been able to attend trips.

Ron Gardner, the CEO of the New Birth of Freedom Council, responded to one of the emails saying he was unhappy about the situation.

Other emails from early 2019 assert that one scoutmaster went on a two-day overnight trip, even though some of his clearances had expired. And in an email just this month, a York-based troop member complained that one of its leaders had attended a two-day camp last summer thinking his clearances were on file, when, in fact, New Birth of Freedom Council officials had no record of them.

In an interview in November, Gardner acknowledged that keeping track of clearance applications after the requirement took effect in 2015 had been difficult and that the council initially dedicated more resources to stay on top of them.

He also said he was not aware of problems with clearance applications being lost, potentially allowing for volunteers to go on trips without them on file.

When sent follow-up questions citing the email chains supplied to the news organizations, Gardner confirmed that a troop leader did, in fact, not have clearances on file when he participated in an overnight trip. He said the council warned the troop leader before the trip that his clearance was expiring and that the clearance has since been obtained.

Gardner said in a statement that the safety of troops is paramount and that the Boy Scouts of America employs "a multi-layered process of safeguards that serve as

barriers to abuse” that, in addition to background checks, includes training and other programs.

Gardner also said individual troops share the responsibility of ensuring clearances are appropriately maintained. Unit leaders themselves are volunteers.

“At the unit level, it is the responsibility of the unit committee chair and chartered organization representative to ensure that compliance is handled before the individual can begin volunteering,” he said.

Gardner declined to answer specific questions about whether he had been notified by troop leaders about clearances that were not on file. He also declined to say whether he had met with the leaders to address the issues.

MORE COMPLAINTS

Concern over who is monitoring to ensure background checks are completed extends statewide. The Department of Human Services received at least five complaints in 2019 about volunteers allegedly lacking proper clearances, according to records released under the Right to Know Law.

One was from an administrative assistant in Allegheny County who processes summer camp referrals for foster children in the county’s care. Another was from a Philadelphia resident who had children involved in sports.

A third was from a retired county detective in the state who had investigated crimes against children. In a May 12 email last year, he wrote: “I am very concerned that youth programs do not take the required clearances seriously.”

In almost every instance, the department did not intervene, instead telling them to either address it directly with the organization, contact the organization’s insurance carrier — which often requires them to properly maintain clearances — or report the organization to the local district attorney’s office.

In one candid response, a state Human Services Department employee wrote: “We find that the area of enforcing this law (especially as it pertains to clearances) is one which requires strengthening.”

The employee added: "Some of the difficulty is that the PSP (Pennsylvania State Police) and/or the District Attorney may not have the time or resources to charge a person or agency in a case such as this and therefore the law continues to be broken."

Sunday, York County's district attorney, said the state should implement a clear and confidential way to report noncompliance and also require that it be reported to police. But even when complaints are filed, they rarely prompt action.

So far, no one has been prosecuted for violating the law, according to data maintained by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts.

Bucks County District Attorney Matt Weintraub said it would be difficult to successfully prosecute someone under the law as written because it states that an employer's failure to get clearances from staffers or volunteers is a crime if it is "intentional."

"There has to be willful violation of the law," he said, adding that a prosecutor would have to pitch the equivalent of "a perfect game" to win.

Time and resources are also a factor, said Tom Hogan, who retired last month as Chester County's district attorney after completing two terms. New laws enacted after the Penn State scandal "exponentially increased" prosecutors' workloads, Hogan said.

Complaints about clearances, he said, can get "dropped further down the list of priorities."

"You have to take care of the biggest forest fire first, and the candle burning in the corner ... gets less attention," Hogan said.

VIII. Closer Look: Are opportunity zones economic development or subsidized gentrification? (The York Dispatch)

York City Mayor Michael Helfrich's administration has touted its five federally designated opportunity zones as a potential boon to impoverished neighborhoods and a boost to local economic activity.

But where the Democratic administration sees economic gains and neighborhood improvements, others see a different opportunity for wealthy developers: reaping the benefits of substantial tax breaks with little oversight.

"The way we frame it is that there are different buckets of flaws in the program," said Samantha Jacoby, senior tax legal analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy, a Washington, D.C.-based left-leaning think tank. "And they all sort of stem from the nature of the incentive as being fundamentally centered around capital gains appreciation."

Capital gains are a return on investments. In the U.S., a tax is levied on capital gains from investments such as stocks, bonds and real estate. Wealthy investors seek to grow these gains as much as possible.

Opportunity zones, which entitle investors to capital gains tax cuts and deferrals to put money into them, are a relatively new phenomena, though states have toyed with similar models for decades.

They were created by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 that was signed by President Donald Trump.

Municipalities may apply for certain areas to be designated opportunity zones — subject to the governor's approval — if the zones have a poverty rate of at least 20% or have 80% or less of the statewide median family income in the state's nonmetropolitan or metropolitan areas.

York City's five opportunity zones are the only ones in York County. There are two aspects of the law that are meant to appeal to a city battling blight and poverty.

The first aspect of opportunity zones is much less controversial. That entails giving grant applicants priority consideration if the applicants intend to improve one of the impoverished zones.

Where concern arises, some experts say, is the capital gains deferrals and tax breaks offered to wealthy investors who could gentrify neighborhoods through investments that are anything but altruistic.

For example, a wealthy investor could throw funds into building luxury condos in a poor neighborhood. Such a move could make living expenses unattainable for the local poor, often minority communities, eventually forcing people to relocate.

Helfrich has acknowledged these risks. But he has said the potential benefits cannot be ignored in a community where nearly 36% of the residents live in poverty.

"The ideal project for us and the reason that we set up the opportunity zones the way we did is to bring jobs, walkable jobs, into the city," Helfrich said.

Even if investors were to beautify neighborhoods and raise rents, Helfrich said, decreasing unemployment and bringing higher wages into those areas could bring the most important benefit of all: allowing residents to own homes, rather than rent them, giving them the ability to release themselves from the constraints of landlords.

A majority of the opportunity zones in the city would serve underutilized manufacturing buildings that once held 500 to 1,000 employees but now have maybe five to 10, Helfrich said.

The mayor teased that the city would be working with a highly rated organization to bring in social impact investors, which would help ensure that those pouring money into the city would have good intentions. He would not name the organization.

The idea of investors coming in to benefit from the tax breaks has also garnered the attention of members of the city's minority communities, most notably Hispanics and Latinos, who make up nearly 32% of the city's population.

"We definitely have to be vigilant because (opportunity zones) have caused gentrification, and employees have been brought in from outside the communities," said Lou Rivera, an incoming York City councilman and founder of Latinos Unidos, a nonprofit Latino-advocacy organization.

However, there are very limited restrictions on what kind of investments can qualify for tax breaks and what a municipality can do to ensure investors come in with good intentions.

"The funds themselves and those implementing the funds don't have to report to municipal governments," Helfrich said. "There's no law that requires that. There could be 10 projects going on in York now using opportunity funds and we would have no idea."

More specifically, there is no language in the 2017 legislation requiring investors to lay out a case for how their projects are going to affect communities, said Brady Meixell, research analyst at the Urban Institute.

They also aren't required to disclose how communities are affected once the projects are underway or finished.

And the tax breaks and deferrals are plenty tempting for the potential investors who aren't subjected to restrictions. As it now stands, investors would not pay tax on 15% of their deferred capital gains for up to seven years.

For example, for a \$1 million investment, investors would be taxed on \$850,000. The capital gains tax for high-income individuals is 20%.

But that 15% is only temporary, as it will change after Dec. 31. After that, investors would only receive a 10% tax benefit on investments.

There are two other key benefits as well.

The law permits investors to place existing capital gains into those same funds. By doing so, they wouldn't be taxed until 2026.

Additionally, for investments held in such funds for at least 10 years, investors wouldn't pay a dime in capital gains taxes.

The numbers are clearly tempting for investors, especially when there is little oversight. But some changes could be implemented to clamp down on money-hungry individuals, Meixell said.

For one, the federal government could rule out any areas that don't meet the low-income requirements.

In New York City, for example, the city has its share of opportunity zones because of a public housing development, even though the city's median home value is about \$2 million.

The government could also use a rigorous certification process to allow opportunity funds to only be used for investments that would benefit local communities, such as affordable housing or clean energy development.

And finally, the government could enact transaction-level reporting that "answers the who, what, when, where and how much of all investments made."

Similar recommendations are present in a bill written by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., in a bill that now sits in the Senate Finance Committee. There is not a companion bill in the House.

The only roadblocks threatening these changes, however, may be the current state of politics.

"I don't expect any kind of large changes to necessarily go through in the current political environment, but depending on how opportunity zones shake out in the first year, depending on the sorts of projects we are seeing in communities, there could be a groundswell of political opposition," Meixell said.

IX. Has anything changed 50 years after York burned? (The York Dispatch)

The degree to which race relations have improved in York City since the riots of 1969 depends on who is asked.

Politicians say good-faith efforts over decades have attempted to address the lingering poverty and disproportionate policing of the city's black neighborhoods, but they admit more needs to be done.

Police department officials say outreach efforts have built trust between officers and African American residents in the city, whose numbers have nearly doubled since 1970 — from 6,525 to roughly 11,514. Even longtime activists say some progress has been made.

But to Eric Kirkland, one of more than a dozen shot when leaving a basketball game in 1968 by a white man who was never charged — which some say contributed to the riots a year later — all the talk from officialdom doesn't jibe with the economic realities faced by the city's poor minority communities.

"Race relations have improved at a snail's pace compared with the other advancements that have been made in this community in the last 50 years," he said. "They have not kept up with the development of downtown. Individually, collectively and institutionally, there has been very little to no progress."

Kirkland, a 67-year-old York City resident who owns a local consulting firm, recalled having good friends who were white. Not everyone embodied the racism that was on display during that time. And he says he's an example of how those who faced systemic racism can still make a name for themselves.

But he still remembers, in granular detail, the day he was shot — from when he woke up to play in a widely advertised basketball game to when he was discharged from the hospital the next morning. He also carries a physical reminder, with shotgun pellets still embedded in his body.

The fallout from the deadly race riots 50 years ago that left two dead and many more injured has lingered for decades.

And with a skyrocketing Latino presence that totals nearly 14,000 — in 1970 only 254 individuals identified as something other than black or white — race relations are more complex than ever, making a direct comparison with the 1960s difficult, Kirkland said.

A community forum known as the charrette was held over nine days in April 1970, seeking to tackle the reasons for the riots and address the systemic racism in York.

The forum resulted in the creation of Family First Health, Rabbit Transit, the Housing Council and York Housing Development Corp.

But whites still hold a significant majority of management positions within local government, Kirkland said, adding that investments in the city of roughly 45,000 are hyper-focused on downtown and the Codorus Creek corridor, which do not benefit minorities, specifically those in poverty.

Blacks and Hispanics now make up nearly 60% of York City's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. As of 2016, the city's poverty level was 36%, roughly three times the statewide average. Housing, income and educational disparities remain.

For example, the Codorus corridor accounts for 35% of York County's minority population and 25% of its poverty, yet that area accounts for less than 1% of the county's land area, according to the York County Economic Alliance.

The York City School District, which has a student population that is roughly 50% Latino and 32% African American, has the lowest test scores in the state. In 2012, the state placed the district in financial recovery, and it narrowly avoided having all of its schools transformed into charters. District officials say its test scores and finances are improving.

York City Mayor Michael Helfrich's administration has implemented initiatives to bolster relationships with the minority community, but he acknowledges systemic oppression and generational poverty remain in the city.

"We are in a place where we're trying to address the social conditions that helped provide the kindling for the fire there," Helfrich said, referring to 1969. "Economic inequality is the next civil rights issue. I think a lot of the negativity associated with race differences is more about economics and fear of change."

In September, the city will announce plans for microloan programs for small business owners and local sourcing, in which the city would contract local businesses for goods and services.

The city already has initiatives aimed at bolstering race relations and communication, such as the Community Ecosystem Initiative. York City also continues with its Group Violence Initiative, which aims to curb violence by reaching out to at-risk youth to provide them with resources and bolster relationships with city police.

It also works with independent groups such as the Confronting Racism Initiative, the Black Ministers Association and the Community Street Soldiers.

But even so, these initiatives won't address systemic inequalities that result in disparate treatment of people of color, local advocates have said.

That's especially true, Crispus Attucks Association CEO Bobby Simpson wrote in a recent op-ed, when speaking about the York City Police Department, which is populated by officers who are 90% white.

"Our police department deals with life and death issues in their relationships, and how they feel may depend on the outcome of a situation, particularly when split-second decisions have to be made," Simpson wrote.

Neither boosting the number of minority police officers nor cultural sensitivity training will, on their own, be enough to end systematic oppression and individual prejudice, said Simpson, who was present during the riots in 1969 and a witness in the trials decades later.

Simpson did not respond to requests for comment.

York City Police Chief Troy Bankert said building relationships within minority communities is key to defusing potentially explosive situations. The department strives to provide accurate information before rumors that may fuel racial tensions spread.

"(Our initiatives) allow (minorities) to have input into what goes on in the city," the chief said. "The basis of what we're doing is the honesty and transparency. The idea is that it's a partnership — but I have to take the lead."

Shiloh Baptist Church pastor Larry Walthour, who works with the Community Street Soldiers and Black Ministers Association, said these initiatives that often involve city and police officials have built trust and exemplify a different York City than existed 50 years ago.

"I see a beginning," Walthour said. "I think if the conversation and commitment to the work follows through, you'll see progress. I think conversation leads to collaboration. But it's too soon to tell."

Walthour noted he's fighting for not only minorities but also whites in poverty who may be in similar situations throughout York County.

"Racism has been used as a means to divide this community, but it's not only black and white," he said. "It's classism. When I talk about equality and equity, I'm talking about everybody."

Some residents, including Ophelia Chambliss, spokeswoman for the York NAACP, also recognize the progress of such initiatives. But those strides, as Kirkland said, may come at a snail's pace.

"Getting into the situation we're in didn't come overnight," Chambliss said. "Long-term problems will take long-term solutions. These are not immediate things people can put their finger on. They're systemic."

After the riots trials in the early 2000s, attempts were made to heal the community and foster unity. However, organizations such as the York County Community Against Racism dissolved because of inactivity.

The grassroots movements seen in the city today show a different trend, Chambliss said, adding that minorities taking empowerment into their own hands in a visible manner precipitates more tangible progress than decisions that are made higher up the ladder. But larger-scale reform will come from the top, she added.

That includes local and state government leaders, corporations, landlords, police and everyone else who is in a position to work toward such changes, she asserted.

"There are going to be tough decisions," Chambliss said. "Ultimately, those organizations have to make the decision for themselves — this is a long-term investment, and if they make things better, it's better for everyone. As long as everyone's working toward the same goal, we'll get there."

Some progress is also being made in the ever-growing Latino community, said Lou Rivera, chairman of the Latino-advocacy nonprofit Latinos Unidos. But as with the African American community, there is much that is yet to be seen.

"The Latino community has been more involved," Rivera said. "We've seen the Latino community become more galvanized and engaged. They're owning businesses, buying homes and getting involved in the civic process on boards and commissioners. And that's going to continue. That will not end."

Rivera appears positioned to seize a seat on York City Council next year.

The Latino community wouldn't have grown as much as it has or be as engaged without the African American community or the race riots, Rivera asserted, as the riots allowed the black community to grow and have a voice.

Fifty years later, Latinos have struggles similar to those in the African American community, such as health, education and income disparities. There are also no Latinos in leadership positions in the city.

What must follow is Latino and African American representation in positions of power in the city, people who can have a voice to advocate for their disenfranchised communities, Rivera said.

Some observers have said the push for progress has seemed more necessary at times in the last couple of years, as several incidents caught the attention of the national news media and raised the question of whether York ever really made strides.

Last year, former York County Commissioner Steve Chronister called the police twice on five African American women golfing at Grandview Golf Club in Dover Township.

The incident garnered national news coverage and prompted two hearings by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. Neither Chronister nor any representative from the golf club attended.

The commission has since has held four town halls in York County to address acts of racism within county borders, including KKK flyers in West Manchester and Dover townships and racist literature targeting Hanover Mayor Myneca Ojo, the first female African American mayor of the borough.

Latinos have often called for more representation in leadership positions and more vocal support by city officials for immigrants.

And as Helfrich says he is making economic equality a priority, he's also come under fire by minority groups because of his economic policies.

Last year, the city considered outsourcing economic development to the York County Economic Alliance. During several City Council meetings, residents of color said the majority-white alliance would further gentrify the city.

Helfrich revived the issue when, in May, he appointed Blanda Nace, a former alliance employee, as the city's chief opportunity development officer without City Council approval.

Critics of all backgrounds lambasted Helfrich, alleging the move lacked transparency and that he didn't give enough consideration to minority candidates.

There was a clear disconnect between the city's residents and the Helfrich administration. But unity is what is going to make the difference going forward, Kirkland said, as he sat on the bench commemorating Lillie Belle Allen in Farquhar Park.

"We have a lot of work to do to be able to go where we want to go," Kirkland said. "But it's going to take everyone. It can no longer be black vs. white or black vs. Hispanic. This is going to take a shared approach. From the top to bottom and from the bottom to the top."

