

Grange Members Urged To Support Lawsuit Abuse Reform

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suit reform — farmers, consumers, governments, taxpayers.

As an example of how serious the problem is, Shirvinsky said the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is sued 50 to 60 times every week.

State Attorney General Mike Fisher was the last featured speaker at the Grange event.

He said the state gets sued about 70 times per week, and the issues range. State highways are always an issue.

Fisher said the state pays out about \$35 million a year in damages to travelers on state roads because of lawsuits.

Fisher was originally scheduled to be first speaker of the day for the state Grange, but he changed his schedule to attend a Washington D.C. press conference about tobacco, at the request of President Bill Clinton.

Fisher said he made good time on the road getting to Union Deposit for Grange event. He said he left Washington at 2:20 p.m. He made it to the event by 4:30 p.m.

A spokesperson for Fisher arrived first and took the podium while awaiting Fisher's imminent arrival.

The spokesman talked about Mike Fisher's political positions and spoke highly of Fisher's attributes for leadership.

Fisher explained that he is the state's third elected attorney general. Previous to 1978, they were appointed by the governor.

Recently elected, Fisher's term of office is to last through 2001.

(Fisher's election to the position follows a term that was filled by an appointment required after the state's second elected attorney general, Ernie Preate, was forced to resign, amidst corruption allegations. Preate served several years in low-security prison and has since become religious.)

He said that his job is to be the state's top attorney in criminal and civil matters. He has 180 attorneys working under his command, 350 enforcement officers, and 350 support staff. There are 18 offices across the state and several toll-free numbers.

There are three divisions of concern for the state attorney general office — criminal, civil, and public protection.

In the civil issues, of the 70 lawsuits filed each week against the state, he said about a third of them are filed by prison inmates.

For years, with free access to law libraries, and lots of time available, inmates have filed many civil suits on their own, without representation of an attorney.

Many local-court officials have long been frustrated with the increasingly heavy scheduling and work load required to process, review and dispose of each inmate-filed case, regardless of how frivolous or ridiculous.

On top of that are an increasing mountain of administrative and equally court-time eating frivolous filings by non-inmates.

Fisher talked about a lawsuit filed by an inmate that was reported in newspapers recently. The inmate claimed he should be

compensated for suffering because the prison didn't give the right size underwear.

Reiterating some of the message of the Pennsylvania Civil Justice Coalition, Fisher said something needs to be done to curtail frivolous lawsuits.

Fisher said the attorney general's Public Protection Division focuses on anti-trust issues, and other, more direct, consumer complaints, such as fraud schemes involving repair or home improvement work, credit card fraud.

He said that the Bureau of Consumer Protection receives about 100,000 telephone call complaints and about 30,000 followup written complaints each year. He said that after receiving the written formal complaint, the department attempts to help resolve the issue by serving as mediator.

"All of us are consumers," he said, "so, when we are fighting for consumers, remember all can be victimized."

Fisher touched on a unsolicited telemarketing calls and the laws that govern them.

He said he wrote new laws when he served in the state General Assembly, and he said there are new laws in the works regarding home improvement contractors.

He also talked briefly about the Megan's Law issue and that he supports it. (The law requires those convicted of sexual predation of children to forever announce to local law enforcement officials their past conviction so as to allow the general public to forever identify them as having committed

such a crime, sort of like a scarlet letter.)

According to Fisher, the role of attorney general also includes working cooperatively with other states' attorneys general to combat organized crime and corruption. He briefly discussed a case against Toy-R-U's which this week was found guilty of price fixing.

Fisher also talked about his office's relationship to all the local district attorney offices through the Criminal Law Division.

He said some of the enforcement targets are for public corruption, organized crim, environmental violations, and enforcement of controlled substance laws, specifically to limit the availability of illegally manufactured and/or distributed pharmaceutical substances.

He said that his office has concurrent jurisdiction with local district attorneys in drug enforcement.

It is a popular issue with Fisher. He said, "Problems of drug abuse are not just urban problems. We have seen them spread into all communities."

Fisher said there has been rapid rise in the teenage use of drugs. He said from 1991 to 1996, use of drugs by sixth- through eighth-grade students increased from 10.5 percent to 20 percent.

The abuse of cocaine went from 1.5 percent to 3 percent; of inhalants from 4.8 percent to 8.9 percent; of hallucinogenics from 1.8 percent to 3.8 percent; and heroin from 1 percent to 2 percent, according to Fisher.

He added that heroin has

become much stronger than ever. He said that when it was a problem in the 1970s, the street heroin ran about 6 to 8-percent pure. Today, he said it runs about 50 percent pure and can damage and kill very easily.

He said hospital emergency room treatments for drug overdoses in Mercer County alone in one year went from 132 to 311, he said.

Fisher said all illicit drug users ought to be punished as well. He said that efforts should be made to catch users and to punish them with some sort of restrictions on freedoms, such as perhaps home arrest with a radio transmitter ankle bracelet.

A seizure of 95 kilograms of cocaine was done at the Philadelphia International Airport a week ago, Fisher said. He said a plane came in loaded with the cargo and the suspected smugglers were riding first class on the plane.

He said the cocaine had a street value of \$10 million and that his office made the seizure working together with federal agents. The shipment came in on a flight from Puerto Rico, he said. (The Puerto Rico airport is a key transfer point for many flights from North America to Central and South America.)

Fisher also spoke out against the Philadelphia city government program of exchanging needles.

He said he would like to see it stop, claiming that it does nothing but promote drug use and hasn't made any dent in the number of

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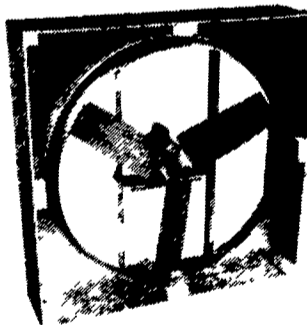
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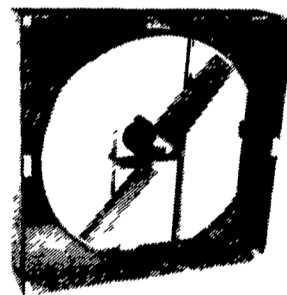
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