

For Immediate Release
Oct. 2, 2024

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Press Release

Challenge Seattle, Partners Launch Public-Private Partnership to Address Organized Retail Theft

Local leaders, businesses, and state, local and federal law enforcement gather for the first King County summit on organized retail crime today, October 2

Cooperative strategy aims to counter trend of large criminal enterprises targeting retail businesses

REDMOND, Wash. – In response to the escalating threat of organized retail theft, regional leaders, law enforcement, mayors, business leaders, organizations, and prosecutors are convening for the first **King County Public Safety Summit on Organized Retail Crime**. The event focuses on creating a long-term public-private partnership to prevent, deter, and hold accountable individuals engaged in the growing issue of organized retail crime in King County, with the goal of scaling statewide.

According to a [Forbes Advisor report](#), Washington state ranked as the state most impacted by retail theft overall. The Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA) estimates Washington state experienced over \$2.7 billion in retail theft in 2021, the second highest in the nation per capita. Recent prosecutions by the U.S. Attorney, Washington Attorney General, and King County Prosecuting Attorney have highlighted thefts from King County stores involving hundreds of thousands of goods worth millions of dollars.

“Organized retail crime is a threat to our community, employees, and customers of our businesses and interconnected to so many other public safety challenges in King County including illegal guns, vehicle theft, burglaries, and the fentanyl crisis. We can only address this issue with a strong public-private partnership between businesses, law enforcement, our local Mayors and policymakers, and prosecutors,” said former Governor Christine Gregoire, CEO of Challenge Seattle.

To enable collaboration going forward, a new [Organized Retail Crime Resource Hub](#), a website for businesses and law enforcement partners, will host resources concerning organized retail crime in the Puget Sound region, helping public and private entities collaborate more efficiently and effectively across jurisdictional boundaries to ensure criminal thefts are detected before they strike again.

Challenge Seattle also issued a new report, [“Organizing a Public-Private Partnership to Defeat Organized Retail Crime”](#) to help all partners better navigate this complex public safety challenge.

With national and local experts, discussions will focus on how law enforcement can coordinate to identify criminal thefts operating in multiple jurisdictions, an analysis of a pilot underway in King County using technology to increase collaboration, and best practices for businesses to address organized retail theft.

Solutions identified at the King County Public Safety Summit will be shared with other counties and the Washington State Legislature to help facilitate coordination and scale throughout the state.

“Through this public-private partnership we have a wealth of expertise, from technology to on-the-ground experience. Our goal moving forward is to leverage our collective resources to enact policies and better coordinate among cities and jurisdictions in ways that make Washington a safer place to do business, and a more enjoyable place to gather, work and shop,” said Renée Sunde, president and CEO of the Washington Retail Association.

A 2024 survey of King County Police Chiefs conducted by Challenge Seattle and Sound Cities Association found that retail theft and commercial burglaries were one of the top two public safety concerns facing a majority of jurisdictions in King County. According to a [2023 report from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs](#), a larceny or theft offense was committed every 3.6 minutes in the state of Washington. Retailers of all sizes are facing increasing losses due to theft, which has detrimental impacts to employees, customers, the overall community, and quality of life.

Speakers at the summit include former Washington Governor Christine Gregoire, U.S. Attorney Tessa Gorman, Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent in Charge Robert Hammer, Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, Nordstrom CEO Erik Nordstrom, King County Prosecutor Leesa Manion, Seattle City Attorney Ann Davison, and others from the public and private sectors.

The summit is taking place at Microsoft and hosted by Challenge Seattle in partnership with the Washington Retail Association, Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, Bellevue Chamber and Sound Cities Association.

What participants are saying:

“Partnering with Issaquah’s local retailers and our police chief is essential in tackling organized retail theft. At the same time, we need to think beyond our boundaries, as this issue affects store in many neighborhoods throughout our region. By fostering strong public-private partnerships, we can better safeguard our community and ensure a safer environment for all residents and retail workers,” said Mary Lou Pauly, mayor of Issaquah, Wash.

“None of us can solve the complex challenge of organized retail crime alone or in a silo. Partnerships with key community stakeholders like the ones we’ve developed in King County give us an immediate advantage over bad actors and puts all of us in a better position to tackle this issue. The shared commitment to collaborating and restoring vibrancy to our communities, along with the insights we’ve gathered through our pilot here, has created a growing sense of optimism within the retail community that we can find effective solutions and make real progress on ORC,” said Brian Dodge, president of Retail Industry Leaders Association.

“A vibrant community requires that businesses and people feel safe,” said Brad Smith, Vice Chair and President of Microsoft. “We are pleased to support collaboration between local businesses and law enforcement agencies to help deploy smarter tools and improve public safety across the Puget Sound region.”

“Let’s be crystal clear: organized retail theft is organized crime – it is the practice of reselling stolen goods through online marketplaces, unregulated markets such as illegal street markets, and storefronts that buy stolen goods,” said Rachel Smith, president and CEO of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. “And these crimes are not victimless – they hurt a business’ ability to attract and retain employees and customers, and businesses are forced to raise prices to cover their losses. And in extreme cases, such as selling expired food or medicines, they can even harm consumers. But we can

tackle this challenge, and the Organized Retail Crime Resource Hub is a great new tool in the toolbox that will contribute to a reduction in this activity in our region.”

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About Challenge Seattle

Challenge Seattle is an alliance of 23 organizations that represent some of our region’s largest employers and most successful innovators. Led by former Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire, we harness our members’ bold thinking, committed leadership, unique resources, and world-class talent to tackle some of our region’s most pressing civic challenges.