

The DOCKET

Summer 2024

Phil Sorrells - Tarrant County District Attorney



A Message from

DA Phil Sorrells



Stop into the courthouse the next time you're downtown. Sit in on one of our trials.

We are prosecuting tough cases, and juries are giving lengthy prison sentences to those convicted of heinous crimes.

Look at these recent convictions and sentences:

Jose Margarito Sonora, 54, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon that caused serious bodily injury for shooting the mother of his children twice and leaving her in a park – 99 years.

Ricky Ensley, 58, murdering a stranger by stabbing him 18 times at a gas station in Arlington – 99 years.

Nathan Woodard, 28, murdering his mother by stabbing her more than 20 times outside her Arlington home – 80 years.

David Garibay, 42, aggravated sexual assault of a child and indecency with a child for sexually abusing multiple relatives as young as 7 – 70 years.

Nolan Neighbors, 33, aggravated kidnapping and aggravated sexual assault of a child after keeping a 13-year-old girl in his Arlington apartment and sexually abusing her for three days until police found and arrested him – 60 years.

Lastly, juries handed down life sentences on three defendants and imposed the death penalty on Paige Lawyer for killing his former girlfriend and her daughter, (Read about that on page 3).

We are fighting for justice every single day.

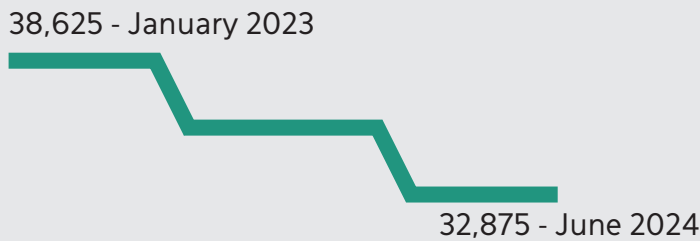
And we are making a difference.

Highlights from the DA's Office

By The Numbers

This office continues to chip away at the caseload that dramatically swelled in the criminal courts during Covid restrictions. Here's a look at the recent numbers.

Pending Cases



77

Murder & Capital
Murder Cases
resolved this year
by June 1

Graduates

Congratulations to the 23rd graduating class of our office's Citizen Prosecutor Academy!

More than a dozen people graduated from this class in late May.

Over the course of 12 weeks, leaders, prosecutors, investigators, and staff taught the class about every step of prosecution, from Financial Fraud to Conviction Integrity to Protective Orders.

Participants also learned how the criminal justice system works in Tarrant County.

Anyone interested in information about the Citizen Prosecutor Academy should call our office: (817) 884-1400.



'Two lives were extinguished that day'

A Tarrant County jury did something in April that local juries haven't done in years.

It sentenced a man to death.

This was the first time Tarrant jurors sent someone to Death Row since 2019, when Hector Acosta – who was convicted of killing of two people in Arlington – was sentenced.

In this case, Paige Terrell Lawyer, 44, was given the death penalty for the capital murder of O'Tishae Womack, 30, and her daughter Ka'Myria Womack, 10.

Tarrant County Assistant DAs Lloyd Whelchel and Dale Smith prosecuted the case. DA Investigator Caleb Blank and Victim Coordinator Cecilia Jones also worked on the case.

On April 5, 2018, O'Tishae and her sister, Lashundra, went for a walk and saw Lawyer several times. Lawyer and O'Tishae had been in a relationship marked by domestic violence, where Lawyer had strangled and choked O'Tishae many times.

The next day, O'Tishae didn't show up for her morning walk with her sister – and she didn't answer phone calls, texts, or knocks on the door at her home. Eventually, Lashundra got a key to her sister's east Fort Worth apartment and went inside.

She found the bodies of O'Tishae and Ka'Myria.

Both had been strangled. Ka'Myria also had been viciously raped.

"He brutally, with no justification, took the lives of two people," Whelchel told the jury.



Paige Lawyer

Lawyer's DNA was found on the knot in the bag around O'Tishae's head, under O'Tishae's fingernails, on Ka'Myria's shorts, inside Ka'Myria's underwear, on a bleach bucket, and on a Lysol can. His fingerprint, in Ka'Myria's blood, was found on a mop.

"Two lives were extinguished that day," Smith said. "Both died as a result of strangulation, the defendant's calling card."

The jury deliberated for about seven hours, spread out over two days, before deciding to give Lawyer the death penalty instead of life in prison without parole.

Lashundra was in the courtroom for the entire trial. After the sentence was read, she gave a victim impact statement. She said her family remains devastated by the loss of O'Tishae and Ka'Myria.

"You took a huge chunk of our hearts," she told Lawyer. "You forever will be known as a murderer, a rapist, and a coward."

As jurors left the room, Lawyer began loudly speaking as bailiffs escorted him to the holding cell.

"I'll be back," he said. "You'll see me again!"

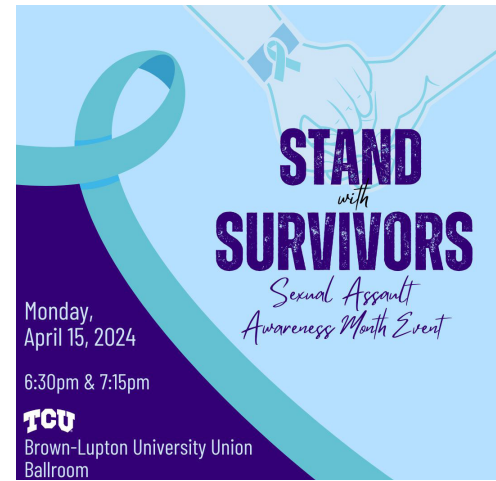
Stand With Survivors

Did you know that at least one in seven children across the country have been abused or neglected in the past year? And did you know that one of every four women and about one in 26 men have been a victim of attempted or completed rape?

Many people don't realize how big the problem is.

That's why our office this year helped kick off a new campaign to draw attention to April being Sexual Assault Awareness and Child Abuse Prevention month.

Assistant DA Kim D'Avignon worked with partner agencies – the Women's Center, Project Beloved, JPS, Phoenix, and TCU – to change the conversation surrounding sexual abuse.



The overall goals were to spotlight partner agencies, provide resources to victims, and make sure the community knows the DA's Office is committed to prosecuting sexual violence crimes.

"We will Stand with Survivors wherever they are and meet them with whatever resources would most benefit them," D'Avignon said.

We took more than two dozen photos of partners and DA teams with our Stand With Survivors sign and shared them on our social media sites to spread the word. We took videos of events held in April to draw attention to services available for victims.

On top of that, nearly 100 DA employees signed up to participate in the Victory Over Violence walk/run to show support for the Women's Center's anti-violence initiatives. Our team's name was "State's Ready," and we were pleased to champion the Women's Center, a vital community partner that helps men, women, and children overcome the trauma of assault and violence.



"As someone who has done this work for over 20 years in Tarrant County, I am proud to say we have come a long way in how we treat cases involving sexual assault," D'Avignon said. "I have watched so many brave women and men confront in court the person who attacked them. It is often a very lonely journey for a victim of sexual abuse to come forward and prosecute."

"Sadly, I have seen time and again victims who had little or no support with them in court," she said. "That is why we must stand with them on this journey and let them know they are not alone – the citizens of Tarrant County will stand in support of them."

Honoring Victims

We work hard every day to help crime victims.

It takes courage to report a crime and repeatedly tell the story of what happened in settings ranging from police stations to courtrooms. We appreciate everyone who helps crime victims navigate their way.

“We know how important this job is,” DA Phil Sorrells told a crowd gathered for the National Crime Victims Rights’ Week on April 22. “It takes all of us – the entire community – to do it.”

First Assistant DA Robb Catalano said he saw first-hand how the criminal justice system impacted many victims. Before joining DA Sorrells’ office early last year, Catalano served as a criminal district court judge for 17 years.

“I listened to countless victims share their stories in a cold courtroom, ... whether it was an 8-year-old girl who had to testify about things she should never know about or an elderly victim who was brutally beaten in a home invasion.”

“Just listening to their testimony in court, you saw how nervous they were when they got on the witness stand.”



Catalano said he hopes people will treat crime victims with the compassion, empathy, and support they need and deserve.

“Let us honor the courage and strength of crime victims, ensuring that their voices are heard,” he said.

During the National Crime Victims’ Rights Week event, certificates of appreciation were presented to the Tarrant County Coalition of Crime Victim Services, The Ladder Alliance, Arlington Urban Ministries, Gateway Outreach Team, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

“These agencies and many others in our community play a crucial role in supporting victims in Tarrant County,” said Allison Bowen, director of Victim Services in our office. “Despite being one of the largest counties in Texas, we thrive on working closely.”

Our office sends a special thank you to the NCVRW local committee that helped plan and put on the local event.



Tarrant County officials and DA leaders gathered to participate in a National Crime Victims Rights’ Week event.

Blow Your House Down

It's official.

Alexander T. Wolf, aka The Big Bad Wolf, was found not guilty!

Despite stories to the contrary, it turns out that Mr. Wolf was not guilty of murdering two little pigs when he allegedly huffed and puffed and blew their homes down. He also wasn't guilty of the attempted burglary of a third little pig's house that remained standing because it was sturdy and made of brick.



Derelle Walker, an investigator with the Tarrant County Probate Courts, and Lori Varnell, an assistant district attorney in Tarrant County, were part of the team.

This case now has been settled in a court of law, well, at least in a court where third graders at Southwest Christian School served as jurors.

In May, Tarrant County Probate Judge Brooke Allen presided over this unofficial trial.

Assistant DA Glynis McGinty served as the defense attorney; Assistant DA Lori Varnell played the role of the wolf's grandma; Associate Judge Patricia Burns served as the prosecutor; and Derelle Walker, an investigator with Tarrant County Probate Courts, played the role of the wolf.

McGinty explained to the jurors that Alexander T. Wolf had allergies, really bad allergies, just like his grandma. That's what made him sneeze and accidentally blow the houses down when he went to borrow a cup of sugar to make his grandma a birthday cake. After all, the pigs had been the neighbors of Mr. Wolf for decades.

In the end, jurors believed Mr. Wolf and declared him not guilty.

These trials, while fun, are a key way to expose the next generation to the criminal justice system.

"It is imperative to ensure the continuation of our justice system, which is unrivaled in the world, by escorting the next generation into its courts," Varnell said. "This is why we want to make sure they have a foundation to understand it."

This is the third year our office performed this trial at Southwest Christian School.



Here is the team that presented the trial of Mr. Wolf at Southwest Christian School. ADAs Glynis McGinty and Lori Varnell are on the left.

Human Trafficking

Assistant DA Lindy Borchardt would love to see a day where there are no more human trafficking cases.

Until then, she will continue to prosecute the cases that come to her. And she will continue working to put human traffickers behind bars.

In April, Borchardt joined a veteran human trafficking team sponsored by Unbound Now, a nonprofit group dedicated to eradicating human trafficking, that traveled to Indonesia and Nepal to train others on effective investigation and prosecution strategies.

“I appreciated the opportunity to learn about human trafficking on an international level and share some of our successes in fighting human trafficking,” Borchardt said.

In addition to her, the team included 74th District Judge Gary Coley, McLennan County Assistant DA Liz Buice, and global ministry Buckner International’s Andrea Sparks.

They began in Jakarta, Indonesia, focusing on victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches, stressing the importance of cross-sector cooperation. The team held a seminar and round table discussion focusing on the importance of collaboration in the battle against human trafficking. Participants included judges, investigators, and prosecutors.

They moved on to Kathmandu, Nepal, where they held a two-day workshop focusing on effective strategies and insights drawn from their experiences that could help those handling these cases in the Nepali justice system.

“Even though our justice systems are different, we share a deep commitment to ending human trafficking in our countries,” said Susan Peters,



founder and chief advisor of Unbound Now. “The exchange of knowledge and experience was invaluable.”

Indonesia is a major destination for human trafficking, impacting men, women, and children. Victims are trafficked in Indonesia and across the world.

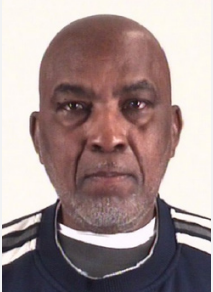
According to the International Labor Organization 2022 report, an estimated 27.6 million victims of forced labor in 2020 were reported around the world, including more than 10,500 in the United States.

Borchardt was recognized by Unbound Now with its Three Key Award in 2023, honoring her for prosecuting human trafficking cases and seeking justice for Tarrant County victims and their families.

Life Sentences

In recent months, three people were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries.

Tommy Williams, 65



Williams was found guilty of the continuous sexual abuse of a young child. He had two victims – first his stepdaughter and then his step granddaughter. Prosecutors: Idris Akinpelu, Hilary Wright. Investigator: James Desmarais. Victim Coordinator: Elizabeth Garcia. March 7, 2024.

Benedicto Cisneros Martinez, 38



Cisneros Martinez was found guilty of the continuous sexual assault of a child under the age of 14. On May 10, 2021, a relative of Cisneros Martinez made an outcry to Arlington Police that Cisneros Martinez had sexually assaulted her multiple times since she was 7 years old. The victim told police that on at least one occasion he gave her drugs before the sexual assault took place. Prosecutors: Matthew Hinojosa, Colin Duffy. Investigator: Brian Johnson. Victim Coordinator: Angela Stevens. April 19, 2024.

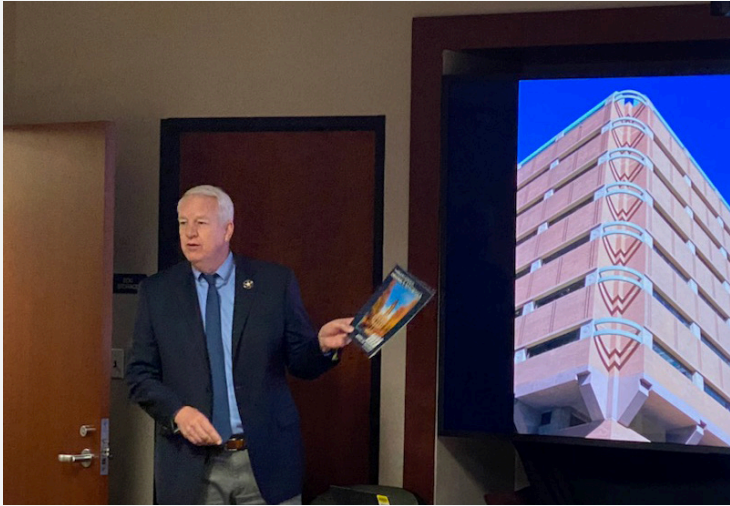
Lorenzo Chacon Garcia, 52



Chacon Garcia was found guilty of the aggravated sexual assault of a child. On June 3, 2018, a 16-year-old relative of Garcia's girlfriend reported that Garcia sexually assaulted her the night before. Garcia picked her up from a dance and gave her alcohol. Just before arriving at her house, he began rubbing her legs and feet in the car and then drove a short distance from her home where he violently sexually assaulted her. Prosecutors: Deanna Franzen, Megan Bradshaw. Investigator: Brent Ezelle. Victim Coordinator: Imelda Lopez. April 25, 2024.

In Our Community

DA Sorrells, his leadership staff, and prosecutors continually speak to community groups throughout Tarrant County, explaining the work this office does. Here's where some of our DA leaders and prosecutors have spoken recently.



DA Sorrells talked to the Colleyville Police Academy about how our office works.



First Assistant DA Robb Catalano welcomed students to our Spring Citizen Prosecutor Academy. Participants learn over the course of 12 weeks about the criminal justice system and how DA Sorrells and his team are fighting to keep our community safe.



Felony prosecutors Lauren Lawrence and Chris DeWitt spoke with students at TCU about employment opportunities and what it's like to work for the Tarrant County DA's Office. Lauren and Chris are both TCU alumni.



ADA Hilary Wright spoke about how challenging sex crimes against teen victims are to prosecute at a Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Ruidoso, New Mexico. She cited a case where a father figure kept a teenage girl with him for nearly a year before dropping her off at the hospital to have his baby.

In Our Community



ADA Allenna Bangs spoke at a Tarrant County Sexual Abuse Advisory Council meeting about how our office works with the community to prevent sexual assault and increase reporting when cases occur. We hold offenders accountable through prosecution.



DA Sorrells spoke at the Tarrant County Law Enforcement Memorial Ceremony, honoring officers who made the ultimate sacrifice.



ADA Nathan Martin (on the right) shared information on how to avoid being a victim during the 2024 Meals on Wheels Texas Annual Conference and Expo in Fort Worth.



DA Sorrells, First Assistant DA Robb Catalano, and ADAs Amy Allin, Lee Sorrells, and Kim D'Avignon participated in this year's Bench Bar Conference.

In Our Community



ADA Lori Varnell spoke to the Colleyville Police Academy, explaining some of the cases she handles.

Groups of DA employees gathered April 8 outside the Tim Curry Criminal Justice Center to see the total solar eclipse. As the moon passed between the earth and the sun, darkness fell, and cool air blew.



Editorial

DA Communications Officer Anna Tinsley Williams wrote and compiled this newsletter.