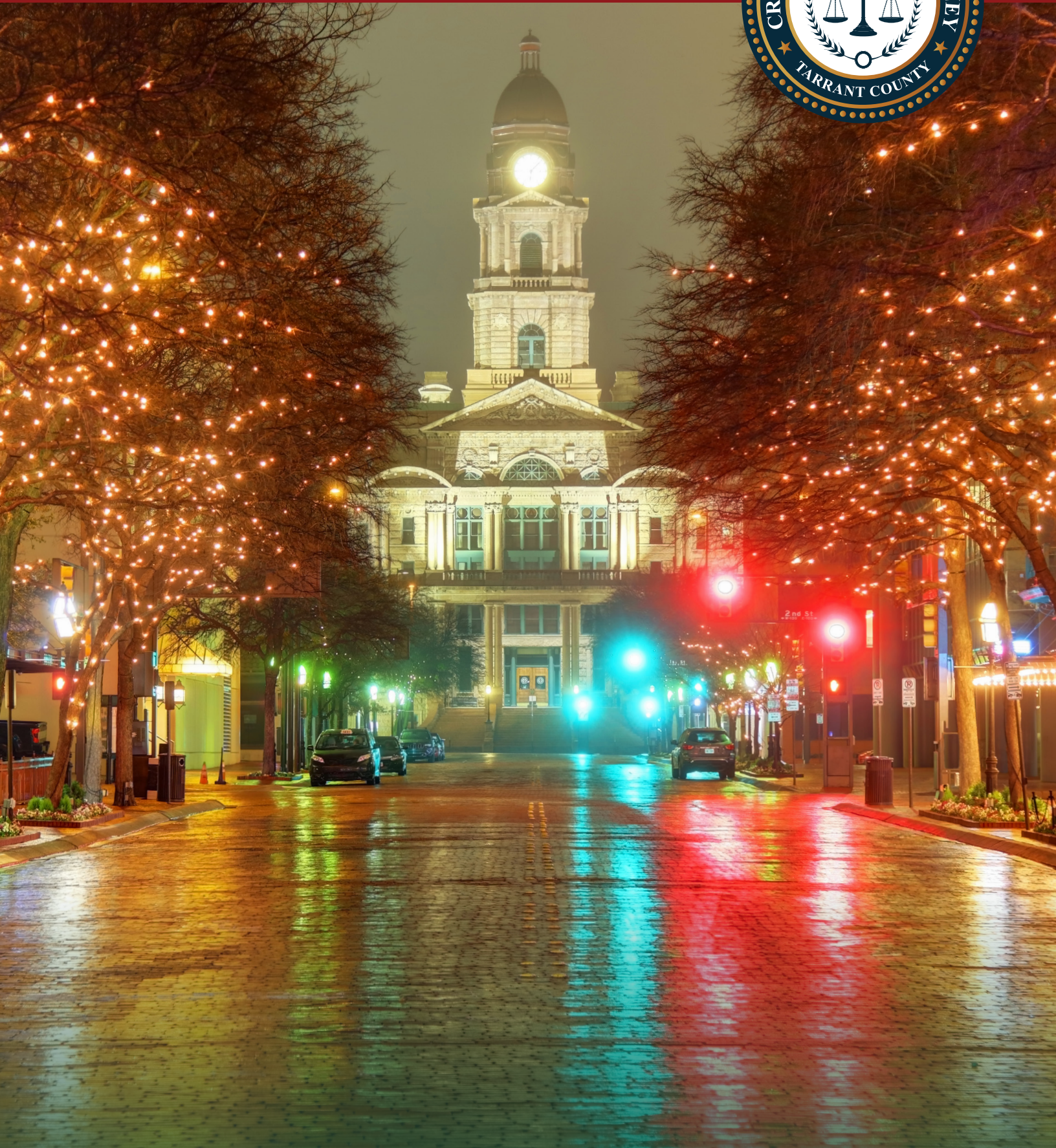


The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - Tarrant County District Attorney

Winter 2024



A Message from DA Phil Sorrells



We don't often ask.

But in 2024, we asked juries three times to convict capital murderers and give them the death penalty.

Three times they agreed.

Here are the men sent by Tarrant juries this year to Death Row:

- Paige Terrell Lawyer, 45, in 2018 strangled his former girlfriend and her daughter, O'Tishae Womack, 30, and Ka'Myria Womack, 10. Ka'Myria had been viciously raped. A jury in April sentenced him to death.
- Jason Alan Thornburg, 44, decided that David Lueras, 42, Maricruz Mathis, 33, and Lauren Phillips, 34 – all at separate times – needed to be sacrificed. He killed them, dismembered their bodies, and set their remains on fire in a dumpster in 2021. A jury in December sentenced him to death.
- Christopher Karon Turner, 48, went into a convenience store in an unincorporated area of Tarrant County in 2020. He robbed the store and shot and killed Anwar Ali, 62, who owned the store. A jury in November sentenced him to death.

Make no mistake.

As terrible as these crimes and these criminals are, it is never an easy decision to seek the death penalty.

We have a committee that, before making that determination, reviews the facts and circumstances of the crime, the investigation, the defendant's criminal history, and the indicators of the defendant's future dangerousness.

Prior to this year, the last time a Tarrant County jury sent a defendant to Death Row was November 2019. That's when a jury convicted Hector Acosta, a Mexican cartel hitman, of capital murder for killing his roommate Erick Zelaya and his girlfriend Iris Chirinos in Arlington. He beheaded Zelaya and displayed his head with a sign threatening future violence.

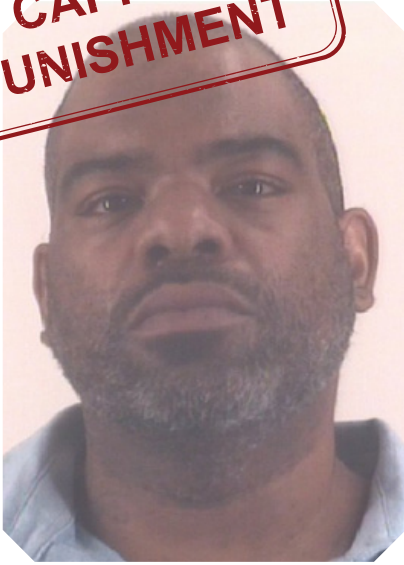
My office and I fight for justice every day, whether in death penalty cases or misdemeanor cases. I am proud to work with so many talented and dedicated attorneys, investigators, and staff. We all are dedicated to keeping Tarrant County safe.

I have high hopes for 2025 and all it may bring to us.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Death Penalty

**CAPITAL
PUNISHMENT**



Christopher Turner

Decades ago, Anwar Ali journeyed from Pakistan to the United States to pursue the American dream.

Married with children, Ali was a hard worker and owned a convenience store – the Super Big Country Mart in an unincorporated area of Tarrant County south of Fort Worth.

Early in the morning on March 27, 2020, Ali opened his store and held the door open for Christopher Karon Turner, who came in wearing a surgical mask and a glove.

Turner, 48, quickly pointed a gun at Ali’s back, forcing him to walk through the store. Ali did everything Turner demanded, including opening the cash register to give him money. Turner forced Ali to the bathroom and onto his knees and executed him.

Seconds later, Turner fled the store in Ali’s Toyota minivan with an unknown amount of cash and Ali’s wallet. In the van, he found more than \$50,000 in a black bag and took that as well.

About an hour later, Ali was discovered dead in the bathroom of the convenience store, shot in the neck.

Ali “was a good person,” said Deputy Chief Allenna Bangs, who prosecuted the case against Turner with Assistant DA Charles Boulware. “At the age of 62, he was wiped away in an instant ... for greed, for absolute lack of respect for human life.”

In the days after Ali’s murder, Turner bought cars, jewelry, drugs, clothes, and more. He and others used cash and a credit card that belonged to Ali.

Turner fled to Colorado. There, U.S. Marshals arrested him. On his body they found a firearm that was determined to be the murder weapon.

“From Day One, from the arrest in Colorado, this defendant has been desperately trying to avoid responsibility,” Boulware said. “He tried to blame it on several other people.”

“He knows exactly what he did.”

A Tarrant County jury found Turner guilty of capital murder for killing Ali during a robbery and sentenced him to death.

DA Investigator Benjamin Lopez and former DA Investigator Jim Rizy, along with Victim Advocate Cecilia Jones, worked on this case.

Death Penalty

Jason Alan Thornburg, 44, murdered three people, cut up their bodies, and burned their remains in 2021.

A Tarrant County jury found him guilty of capital murder and sentenced him to death.

Assistant District Attorneys Kim D’Avignon, Emily Dixon, and Amy Allin represented the state in this case.

During a weeks-long trial that ended in December, Thornburg indicated he took direction from the Bible.

“He knows scripture well. It’s his weapon of choice. He uses it to get vulnerable people to lower their guard,” Allin said. “He will be the friend who gives you a place to sleep, right before he cuts your throat.”

In a September 2021 video, Thornburg said he knew his victims. He determined that David Lueras, Maricruz Mathis, and Lauren Phillips – all at separate times – needed to be sacrificed for religious reasons.

Over a period of seven days, Thornburg brought each one of them, separately, into the room he was renting at the Mid City Inn in Euless.

“They were all lured to their death in that hotel room,” Dixon said.

There he killed them, cut their bodies into pieces in the bathtub, then put their body parts into trash bags and eventually into storage tubs. He slit the throats of Lueras and Mathis. He strangled Phillips and later sexually assaulted her corpse. He ate some of Lueras’ heart and cut off his penis.



Jason Thornburg

“What he did was methodical and sadistic,” D’Avignon told the jury. “Hurting people is something he likes to do.”

In the early morning hours of September 22, 2021, he took all the body parts to a dumpster on Bonnie Drive. Once the remains were there, Thornburg set them on fire and drove away. He then cleaned the tubs and returned them to the store where they were bought.

Later that morning, firefighters responded to a dumpster fire. They found the dismembered human remains burning. They extinguished the fire, and police soon tracked down Thornburg as the person who put the remains in the dumpster.

Thornburg told police he also killed his roommate Mark Jewell in 2021 and his girlfriend Tanya Begay in Arizona in 2017.

DA Investigators Caleb Blank and Scott Giovannelli, along with former DA Investigator Pauline Fitzgerald and Victim Advocates Elizabeth Garcia and Allison Bowen, worked on this case.

Fentanyl Murder



Kaeden Farish

A 19-year-old Azle man in October became the first Tarrant County person sent to prison under a new state law that lets prosecutors seek murder charges in some fentanyl deaths.

Kaeden Farish, 19, pled guilty to murder and was sentenced to 19 years in prison. On January 20, 2024, he sold fentanyl-laced pills to a 17-year-old who overdosed and died.

This conviction is the first in Tarrant County under a new Texas law allowing prosecutors to charge individuals with murder if they make or deal fentanyl that causes death. Our office has eight other cases pending.

“We will continue to go after those who seek to profit from this deadly drug,” DA Sorrells said. “If you make it or deal it to someone who dies, we will charge you with murder.”

Fentanyl is a deadly, synthetic opioid that is cheaper to manufacture than other opioids, which is why some dealers substitute it for other substances. It is available in forms ranging from powder and pills to nasal sprays and eye drops. Two milligrams of fentanyl, the equivalent of a few grains of table salt, can be lethal.

Statewide data shows a nearly 20 percent drop in fentanyl-related poisoning deaths over the past year, but there is still much work to be done.

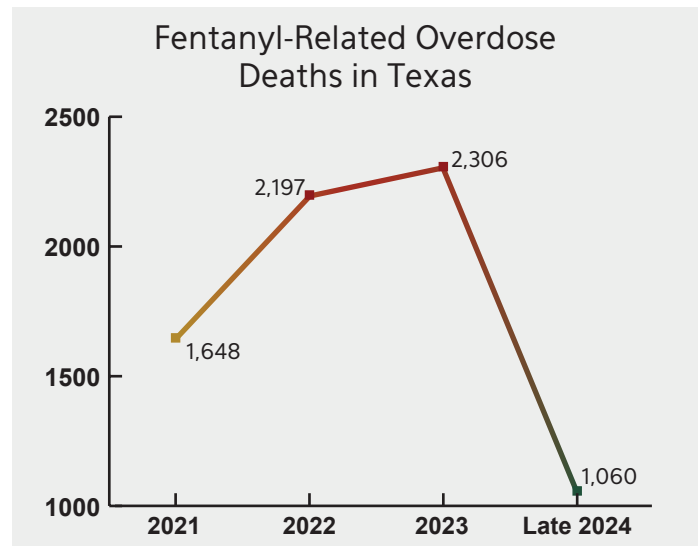
In 2021, there were 1,648 fentanyl-related overdose deaths in Texas. By 2022, that number was up to 2,197 and by 2023, that number was 2,306. By late 2024, that number was down to 1,060, according to data from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

By late 2024, there were 139 overdose deaths in Tarrant County; 57 of those deaths were related to fentanyl, according to Tarrant County Medical Examiner’s Office data.

“This is a scourge in our whole state that we are trying to eradicate,” Sorrells said.

In 2023, Sorrells created a new unit to focus on cases that involve narcotics – fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and more.

“We are working hard to get the people who sell this poison off the streets,” he said. “We are doing everything we can to keep our community safe.”



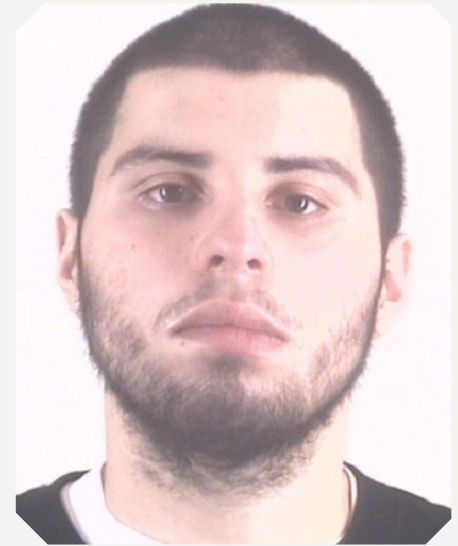
End of Legal Arguments

For more than a year, Zackey Rahimi was in the national spotlight.

This Arlington man committed multiple violent gun crimes in Tarrant County while he was under a protective order for domestic violence, which prevented him from legally possessing firearms.

In September 2021, Rahimi pled guilty to violating federal law for possessing firearms despite the domestic violence protective order. He was sentenced to six years in prison. But on his appeal, he claimed he had a right to keep his guns.

The Fifth Circuit agreed, overturning his conviction. The Government appealed his case to the U.S. Supreme Court.



Zackey Rahimi

On June 21, 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court ended the legal fight. Justices ruled that Rahimi was wrong and domestic violence offenders with protective orders granted against them do **not** have the right to possess firearms.

In late 2024, nearly a dozen cases against Rahimi in Tarrant County ranging from violation of a protective order to aggravated assault with a deadly weapon were resolved.

On October 18, Rahimi pled guilty to felony and misdemeanor state charges against him and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The 15-year sentence will start after Rahimi's six-year federal sentence is completed because the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on September 12, 2024, that Rahimi's federal and state sentences will run consecutively.

When he gets out of prison, Rahimi has promised to stay away from firearms, according to a 2023 letter in his criminal records file.

"I would like to say I apologize for all the trouble I've put all of you through and for all my actions," he wrote in the five-page letter. "Ever since I've been incarcerated I've become a new person, faithful and practicing doing my religion all the way right."

Deep in the five-page handwritten letter, Rahimi promised "to stay away from all firearms & weapons."

NOT ON MY WATCH.

Family violence is one of the most frequently committed crimes in Tarrant County.

In fact, it's the second most prevalent offense, with more than 4,200 currently pending cases.

In October, during National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, our office began an educational campaign to draw attention to the pervasiveness of this brutality.

"Domestic or family violence will not be tolerated here – not on my watch," DA Sorrells said.

We worked to spread the message that we will prosecute these cases and people will be held accountable if they commit domestic violence.



From left to right: Assistant DA Robb Catalano, DA Sorrells, DA Chief of Staff Jason Peters

We took photos, and made videos, of people holding our Not On My Watch signs and shared those images on social media.

Among those featured: DA Sorrells, First Assistant DA Robb Catalano, DA Chief of Staff Jason Peters, Tarrant County Judge Tim O'Hare, Tarrant County Sheriff Bill Waybourn, Fort Worth Mayor Mattie Parker, SafeHaven CEO Kathryn Jacob, The Women's Center employees, JPS workers, and countless prosecutors, investigators, and staff in our office.

We are asking everyone to stand with us and do everything you can to reduce family or domestic violence in Tarrant County.

"This is a problem we can, and will, eliminate," Sorrells said.



Tarrant County Judge Tim O'Hare



Fort Worth Mayor Mattie Parker

To report suspected Intimate Partner Violence, call your local police department. If you are experiencing domestic violence, contact SafeHaven's 24-hour hotline at 1-877-701-7233 for help.

Getting Life

From September 1 to December 1, 2024, six people were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries.

Here's a look at those cases:

Michael Williams, 57



Williams was found guilty of murder. Around 1:30 a.m. April 25, 2021, Williams approached Harold Yazzie, 62, who was sitting in his truck at a Fort Worth apartment complex. Williams stole Yazzie's cell phone and wallet. Yazzie was shot in the leg when he tried to defend himself and later died at the hospital from his injuries.

Prosecutors: Peter Giesecking, Ashton Moore.

Investigator: Kevin Hilliard.

Victim Coordinator: Carma Anderson.

September 16, 2024.

Kendrick Reagor, 41

Reagor was found guilty of burglary of a habitation with the intent to commit sexual assault. On June 28, 2023, Reagor forced his way into a woman's apartment and pointed a gun at her with the intent to sexually assault her. Reagor had previously been convicted of aggravated sexual assault of a child and was on parole at the time.

Prosecutors: Idris Akinpelu, Hilary Wright.

Investigator: Darran Gabbert.

Victim Coordinator: Angela Stevens.

September 27, 2024.



Carlus Qualls, 52



Qualls pled guilty to murder. On April 30, 2021, Qualls, a habitual offender, shot Oscar Lavant Payton in the back of the head. He dumped his body by the side of the road in Fort Worth.

Prosecutors: Steven Elliott, Peter Giesecking.

Investigator: Keven Hilliard.

Victim Coordinator: Carma Anderson.

October 23, 2024.

Getting Life

Leroy White, 54



White was found guilty of the unlicensed possession of a firearm by a felon. On July 29, 2022, while working as security at an Arlington bar, White was involved in an altercation where he fired a weapon at a patron. White was on bond for robbery out of Dallas County Jail at the time of this offense. White also had been convicted for the crime of murder.

Prosecutors: Jeff Stewart, Madeline Jones.

Investigators: Tim Pinckney, Jose Fonseca.

October 24, 2024.

Ryan Willrich, 32

Willrich was found guilty of murder. On May 31, 2020, Willrich went with his girlfriend to an East Lancaster fast food restaurant to meet his girlfriend's ex, Sean Woodberry, and let him take the child she shares with him. Woodbury, 27, approached the driver's side of the car. Willrich, from the passenger's seat, shot and killed Woodberry. The child was still in the backseat of the car.

Prosecutors: Lloyd Whelchel, Rose Anna Salinas.

Investigator: Jose Fonseca.

Victim Coordinator: Cecilia Jones.

November 14, 2024.



Esteban Hernandez, 22



Hernandez was found guilty of manufacturing and delivering between four and 200 grams of a controlled substance. On May 24, 2024, Tarrant County Sheriff's Office Warrants Division officers were notified Hernandez had three outstanding felony warrants. Hernandez also was threatening to cut off his GPS ankle monitor. Working with Tarrant County Pre-Trial GPS Officers, deputies tracked his location and found marijuana, cocaine, and drug paraphernalia in his car. The jury learned Hernandez has multiple pending felony cases against him, including an aggravated sexual assault of a child under the age of 14.

Prosecutors: Michael Ferry, Ashlea Deener.

Investigators: Sean Wheatley, Lee Blaisdell.

Victim Coordinator: Laura Medina.

November 20, 2024.

In Our Community

DA Sorrells and prosecutors continue reaching out to people throughout Tarrant County, talking about criminal justice or explaining how our office works. Here's a look at where some of our staff has been lately.



Deputy Chief Bill Vassar introduced participants to the DA's Citizen Prosecutor Academy this fall. He noted that our office does a lot more than prosecute cases in court.

Assistant DA Stephanie Simpson, second from right, spoke on a panel with other domestic violence experts at an event for Hagar's Heart about overcoming stigmas and misperceptions in the prosecution of intimate partner violence. Hagar's Heart is a local organization that works to empower, educate, and support domestic violence survivors.



Deputy Chief Dale Smith met with people in the community for National Night Out, a time for neighbors and law enforcement officers to strengthen their bonds.

In Our Community



DA Sorrells talked with local law enforcement officers, discussing gun laws.



Assistant DA Hilary Wright spoke about online safety at McLean 6th Grade, teaching students what to do if they come across inappropriate content online.



Felony prosecutors Kobe Landry and Victoria Lydahl spoke at a networking event at the Texas A&M Law School.

In Our Community



Assistant DA Emily Kirby, far left, was among those serving on a panel at SMU's Legal Center for Victims of Crimes Against Women. It is key to educate and encourage future lawyers because they are an important part of protecting victims down the road.

Mental health cases have significantly increased in the criminal justice system, Assistant DA Nelda Cacciotti, the chief of our Mental Health Unit, and other panel members told Texas A&M students and legal practitioners during a Mental Health Criminal Panel.



Romanian prosecutors and police officers visited with DA Sorrells and staff about topics ranging from plea bargains to white collar crime. The visitors were part of the Open World Program, a professional exchange where people meet with counterparts around the world to learn best practices. Assistant DAs Deanna Franzen, Sarah Sherman, and Lori Varnell were among those to speak with our guests.



In the Spotlight

Three of our prosecutors received top awards in September at the Texas District and County Attorneys Association's Annual Criminal and Civil Law Conference in Galveston.

First, Assistant DA Fredericka Sargent was honored as Prosecutor of the Year. She has led the charge in our office on firearms-related cases. She authored our office's amicus brief that was sent to the U.S. Supreme Court, defending a restriction on gun possession for domestic violence offenders. Justices in June 2024 weighed in on the local case, U.S. v. Rahimi, and agreed.



Fredericka Sargent and David Holmes, TDCAA's secretary-treasurer, posed for a photo after the award presentation.



Dale Smith and Allenna Bangs posed for a photo with Jessica Frazier, TDCAA's training committee chair.

Then Deputy Chiefs Allenna Bangs and Dale Smith were honored with the C. Chris Marshall Award. The award recognizes people who have made significant contributions to TDCAA's training efforts, as both Bangs and Smith have. "They are high caliber prosecutors who assist colleagues within their own office, as well as those across the state," TDCAA stated, adding that Bangs and Smith have "significantly raised the quality of prosecution in Texas."

DA Sorrells, First Assistant DA Robb Catalano, Chief of the Criminal Division Rose Anna Salinas, and Assistant DAs Steve Conder and Kate Hinojosa were at the conference and cheered on Sargent, Bangs, and Smith.



Steve Conder, Kate Hinojosa, Rose Anna Salinas, Dale Smith, Fredericka Sargent, Allenna Bangs, Phil Sorrells, Robb Catalano.

Recognition



Assistant DA Michael Ferry and DA Investigator Kevin Brown were honored with the U.S. Attorney's Award of Excellence for their work on the 2019 investigation into the overdose death of

Los Angeles Angels pitcher Tyler Skaggs. In 2022, former Angels Communications Director Eric Kay was found guilty and sentenced to 22 years in federal prison for giving Skaggs the fentanyl-laced pills that killed him.

Assistant DA William Knight won the general election for Criminal District Court No. 2. Knight, a Fort Worth native, is a prosecutor who has worked at the DA's Office since 2015. Congratulations Judge Knight!



Graduates



Congratulations to the latest graduates of our Citizen Prosecutor Academy! This group of more than a dozen people spent the past three months learning about our criminal justice system and how prosecution works in Tarrant County. DA Sorrells personally presented each participant with a certificate of completion. Are you interested in signing up for our Spring Academy? It starts March 6, 2025. For more information, call 871-884-1400.



Editorial

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