

The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - District Attorney



Fall 2023



Accountability

Removing threats to the safety of our community through life sentences

Progress

Continuing to reduce the backlog of criminal cases

New laws

Helping the Legislature get tougher on crime



Message from DA Phil Sorrells

Dedicated. Enthusiastic. Committed.

These words describe the people who work in my office, the county's largest "law firm."

The longer I'm here, the more impressed I am by the work of our attorneys, investigators, and staff.

Not only do they spend weeks and months preparing for trial, they may even spend weeks in trial prosecuting a single case.

Many do so much more.

Some attorneys testify before the Texas Legislature for needed changes in the law, while others speak at conferences or to community groups, educating citizens about the criminal justice system and related issues.

They participate in races and walks to raise awareness and money for non-profit agencies that work with victims and crime survivors. They donate to food banks. They volunteer at grief camps. They teach classes, both in person and online, on a variety of criminal justice issues.

My employees work tirelessly to ensure that criminals are held accountable for their actions and that justice is served, making Tarrant County a safer community.

More than that, they are steadfast.

They are determined.

And they make a difference.

I am proud to work with the people in my office.

Continuing to Make Progress



Since taking office on January 1, DA Sorrells has worked diligently to reduce the case backlog that dramatically grew in the Tarrant County criminal courts under Covid restrictions.

Here's an update on the numbers:

On January 1, 38,625 cases were pending in the Tarrant County criminal courts. In August, that number was down to 35,298. For perspective, the caseload was largest with 48,106 pending cases in August 2021.

As for murders and capital murders, 482 cases were pending on January 1. By late August, we resolved 138 of those homicide cases.

Future Attorneys



This office is proud to cultivate and nurture future lawyers.

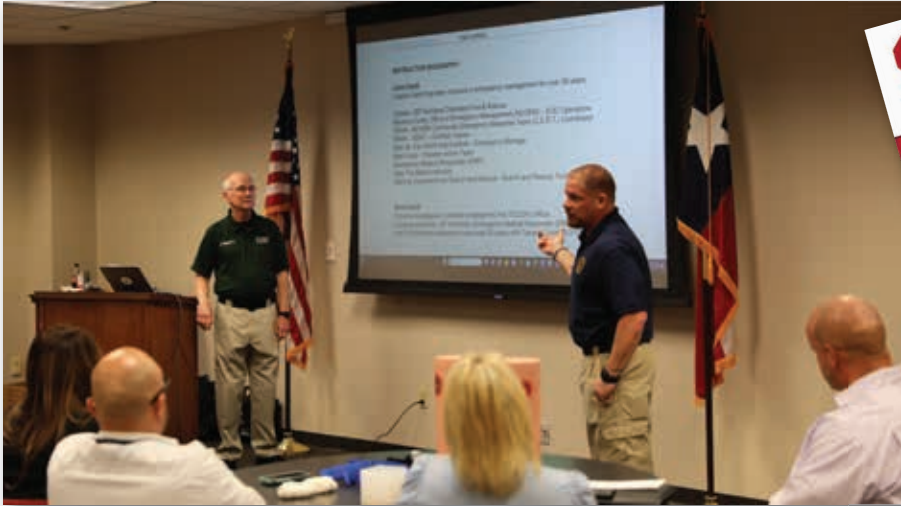
This summer, we welcomed 21 interns in their first or second year of law school – as well as eight post-bar interns who graduated from law school, took the State Bar exam, and were awaiting their test results.

Many interns observed trials, helped prepare cases for trial, watched how juvenile court works, toured the jail, visited the Medical Examiner's Office, and more.

We hosted lunches for the interns, where they had the opportunity to talk with DA Sorrells and other experienced prosecutors in this office.

We look forward to having more interns next year!

Stopping the Bleed



A father and son teamed up this summer to teach DA investigators how to save lives.

Richland Chambers Fire & Rescue Captain John Gantt and his son, Tarrant County DA Investigator Brad Gantt, worked together to teach a program called “Stop the Bleed.”

The techniques in the training session were developed by the American College of Surgeons to teach non-medical individuals how to stop the bleeding of a severely injured person before medical help arrives.

The training session was part of the continuing education requirements for DA investigators.

Being Prepared

The DA’s Victim Assistance team is more prepared than ever to help in the event of an emergency.



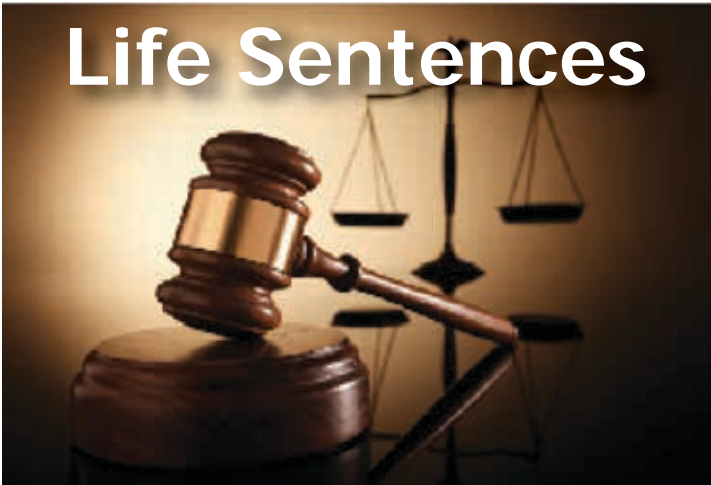
Allison Bowen, director of Victim Services, observed a multi-agency mass casualty training exercise at Richland High School hosted by the North Richland Hills Police Department and the Birdville

Independent School District.

In the active shooter training scenario, the shooter was killed and law enforcement officers practiced searching the school for injured or dead people.

The goal of this training is to prepare law enforcement for this type of emergency and ensure that multiple agencies work together seamlessly to save lives and reduce threats.

“It was an honor to observe first responders and school officials working together to keep our children and school faculty safe in the event of an active shooter,” Bowen said. “Thank you to the North Richland Hills Police Department and the Tarrant County Emergency Management team for organizing this training. I am proud to work and live in a county concerned for its citizens' safety.”



Life Sentences

DA Sorrells is living up to his promise to be tough on crime.

This summer, Tarrant County juries sentenced three men to life in prison. Here's a look at those cases:



Benjamin Allen Bengé, 45, was sentenced July 20 for sexually assaulting his 9-year-old daughter.

Years earlier, Bengé was convicted and sent to prison for sexually assaulting the current victim's mother, who was just 14 years old at the time. When Bengé got out

of prison, he married the girl he was originally convicted of assaulting.

Just hours after he and his wife won back custody of their 9-year-old daughter, he assaulted the child at their home in Hurst.

Prosecutors: Deanna Franzen, Sarah Bruner
Investigator: Matt Hardy
Victim Coordinator: Cece Jones



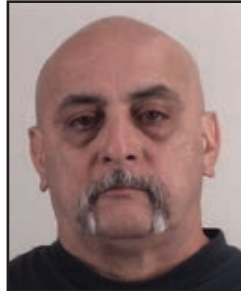
Quincy Neighbors, 36, was sentenced August 11 for the aggravated sexual assault of a child and indecency with a child.

Neighbors wore a security guard uniform and badge in 2022 and took advantage of a 12-year-old runaway girl looking for help at a

Fort Worth bus station. He coaxed her into his car

and drove her to a nearby park where he raped her. In 2013, he was convicted of raping a 16-year-old in Louisiana.

Prosecutors: Courtney Mowdy, Deanna Franzen
Investigator: Tiffany Johnson
Victim Coordinator: Imelda Lopez

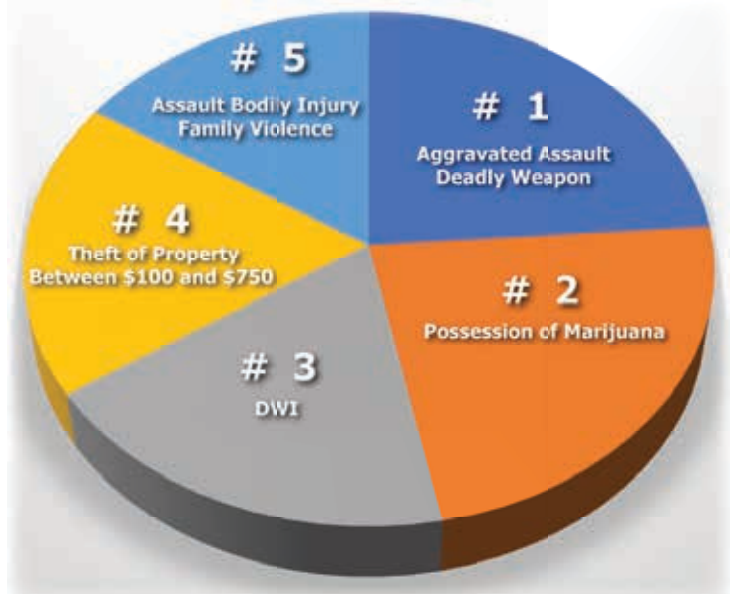


Hector Peralez, 60, was sentenced August 4 on two charges of aggravated sexual assault of a child.

He spent time in prison for two previous convictions of sexually assaulting children. Then he was arrested by Fort Worth police in July 2022 for committing the same crime against the granddaughter of his girlfriend.

Prosecutors: Tad Schmidt, Courtney Mowdy
Investigator: Brent Ezelle
Victim Coordinator: Carma Anderson

Top 5 Most Committed Crimes in Tarrant County



‘I’m not ready to accept your apology’



Calvin Pettit doesn’t know if he can ever forgive Timothy Simpkins.

Simpkins is the 19-year-old who put a bullet in Pettit in 2021. The bullet was about the distance of a dime away from piercing an aortic valve, which would have killed Pettit. The bullet remains in Pettit’s body, near his heart, because it’s unsafe to remove it.

On July 24, Simpkins was sentenced to 12 years in prison for attempted capital murder in the shooting of three people at Mansfield Timberview High School on October 6, 2021. Pettit, who was not the target of the shooting, and two others were injured.

Simpkins, a Mansfield Timberview High School student at the time, pulled out a .45-caliber Glock and began shooting that day after classmate Zaccaeus “Zac” Selby walked into the classroom and began beating him. Teachers broke up the fight; Simpkins began shooting, striking Selby three times – in the abdomen, arm, and leg. Pettit, an English teacher, was hit, as was a female student who was grazed in the hip.

During the sentencing portion of his trial, Simpkins apologized to all his victims.

Pettit said he appreciated the sentiment.

“I sincerely appreciate your apology, and I completely recognize how difficult it must be to admit that,” Pettit said. “But I’m not ready to accept your apology yet.”

“For the pain and suffering you have inflicted upon the people I love, I’m not sure if I can forgive you.”

Prosecutors: Lloyd Whelchel, Rose Anna Salinas

Investigators: Caleb Blank, Ben Lopez, and Danny Nutt

Victim Coordinator: Laura Flores

Recognition



Congratulations to Lori Varnell, who will be honored with an Unsung Hero Award in October from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

This award is given to community partners who demonstrate outstanding work or contributions to the Adult Protective Services program or its clients. Varnell will be honored for her work in protecting vulnerable citizens in Tarrant County from financial exploitation. She will receive the award at the department’s annual conference in Austin.



Congratulations to Dylan Morgan, who was sworn in July 19 as a First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve and as a JAG officer by fellow prosecutor Kyle Russo, on the left.

Morgan will continue to serve as a prosecutor for our office.

New Laws

There's a story behind every new law created in Texas.

This year, five of those stories came from our prosecutors. They saw a need for change, stepped up, and did what they could to turn their ideas into new laws.

Here are measures that became law September 1 this year because of our prosecutors:

Clerk Fees: Out-of-state criminal justice agencies have long paid a small fee for a copy of any document on file at any District Clerk's office in Texas, even if it's just to determine a person's eligibility to buy a firearm or to enhance the punishment of a defendant facing prosecution. The fees are waived for Texas agencies. This new law waives a District Clerk's fee for an out-of-state criminal justice agency seeking documents for a criminal justice purpose, such as determining eligibility to buy a gun. House Bill 1989. ADA Mark Kratovil.

Conspiracy: In Texas, the law of parties allows a person to be criminally responsible for the actions of someone else when there was a conspiracy to commit one crime and a different felony occurs; however, the law did not define "conspiracy" for jurors use in their deliberations. House Bill 2961 defines "conspiracy" for jurors. ADA Lloyd Whelchel.

Family Violence: Texas law allows a misdemeanor family violence assault to be enhanced to a third-degree felony if the offender has previously been convicted of an enumerated offense. However, assault in violation of a condition of bond or protective order (PC 25.07) was absent from the list of charges that could be used for enhancement. House Bill 1589 closed this loophole and now allows offenders who commit family violence assault after a conviction under PC 25.07 to be prosecuted in felony court. ADA Amy Allin.

Human Trafficking – Promotion of Child Prostitution: Previously under Texas law, promotion of child prostitution required the child to already be engaging in prostitution when a sex trafficker recruited her for prostitution. This change in the law protects children who have yet to engage in prostitution when they are recruited by a sex trafficker for prostitution. Senate Bill 1653. ADA Lindy Borchardt.

Protective Orders: This measure amends Family Code provisions to help protect victims. Among the changes: A temporary protective order is enforceable like a final protective order; law enforcement agencies must enter protective orders in warrants databases (so that when officers search for warrants, protective orders also will be listed); and law enforcement agencies must enter new and modified protective orders or related information in the statewide law enforcement information system by the next business day after they receive information. House Bill 660. ADA Marvina Robinson.

State Rep. David Cook (R-Arlington) shepherded these bills through the Legislature this year. State Sens. Joan Huffman (R-Houston) and Tan Parker (R-Flower Mound) authored SB 1653.

In Our Community



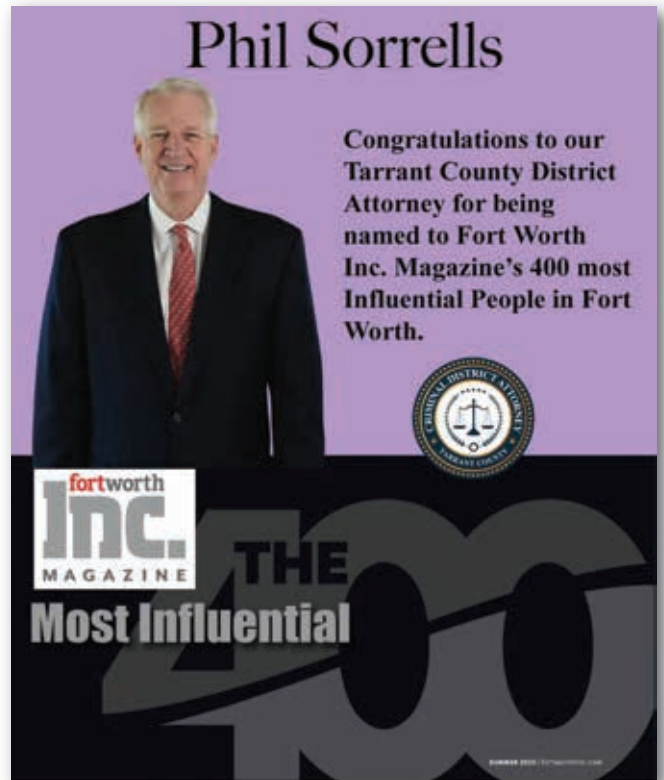
DA Sorrells continues reaching out to community groups across Tarrant County, explaining the work this office does as well as the criminal justice system. Here's a look at some of the groups Sorrells and his prosecutors addressed recently:



Sorrells talked to the Northeast Tarrant County Bar Association about the progress of working through the backlog of cases stacked up during Covid restrictions.



Sorrells also welcomed police officers who joined our prosecutors and investigators for a training seminar to boost their ability to protect our community from impaired drivers.



Sorrells and First Assistant Robb Catalano toured The Women's Center of Tarrant County, which helps victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of abuse.

(Continued on the next page)



Prosecutors Glynis McGinty, Landon Dickerson, and Nathan Martin, along with DA Investigator Kyle Truly, spent a day at the Senior Synergy Expo. Hundreds of people stopped by to discuss Elder Financial Fraud, Elder Abuse, and the new Election Integrity Unit.



Assistant District Attorney Jennifer Therazin spoke to a group of educators about criminal justice during the 2023 Texas Industrial Vocational Association Summer Professional Development Conference.

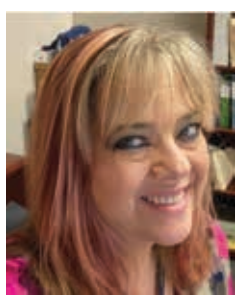


Assistant District Attorneys Emily Dixon, Kim D'Avignon, and Hilary Wright spoke at the 35th Annual Crimes Against Children conference in Dallas. The prosecutors presented information regarding how to overcome obstacles to prosecution and encouraged attendees to never give up, even on cold cases.



Assistant District Attorneys Sarah Sherman (second from the left) and Emily Kirby (second from the right) spoke to a group of rural nurses at the Texas Department of State Health Services. They talked about Intimate Partner Violence, teaching signs of abuse to watch out for at hospitals, doctor's appointments, and more.

Editorial



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