

The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - District Attorney



Winter 2023



Vision

Creating a new narcotics unit to take on fentanyl dealers

New Technology

Solving cold cases with Forensic Genetic Genealogy

By The Numbers

Getting violent criminals off the streets with lengthy sentences

Message from DA Phil Sorrells



Enough is enough.

Too many people have died or ended up in the hospital from an overdose of the latest scourge on society – fentanyl.

No more. Not in Tarrant County.

I created a new unit of prosecutors who will solely focus on crimes that involve narcotics including fentanyl, cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin.

Anyone caught making and/or dealing illegal drugs in Tarrant County will face the stiffest sentences and fines possible.

We are going to get these people – and the poison they are selling – off our streets.

Overdoses involving fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, have created a national crisis. Because fentanyl is cheaper to manufacture than other opioids, some dealers substitute it for other substances.

Just two milligrams of fentanyl – equivalent in size to just a few grains of salt – can be lethal. In Texas, overdose deaths involving fentanyl rose from 891 in 2020 to 2,189 in 2022, according to data from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Fentanyl is highly addictive and deadly.

So far in 2023, there have been nearly 2,500 overdoses in Tarrant County, many from fentanyl. More than 300 people have died from overdoses this year.

Drug crime is often linked to violence. Much of the violent crime in our community has a connection to illegal drugs.

Our Narcotics team is staffed with experienced prosecutors who will diligently pursue drug cases and work closely with law enforcement agencies in Tarrant County.

We are tired of the death and destruction caused by illegal drugs. We will hold people accountable, and we will do everything we can to keep our community safe.

Reducing the Caseload



DA Sorrells has long said one of his top priorities is reducing the backlog of cases that grew in Tarrant County criminal courts under Covid restrictions.

That work continues today.

In January, 38,625 cases were pending in the Tarrant County criminal courts. By early December, that number was down to 34,754 cases. The backlog was highest in August 2021, with 48,106 cases.

As for murders and capital murders, 482 cases were pending in January. By early December, the office resolved 206 of those cases.

Appealing to the Highest Court



Our office protects victims of domestic violence.

We filed an amicus brief in United States v. Rahimi arguing that the Fifth Circuit's decision giving domestic violence offenders the right to possess firearms puts domestic violence victims at even greater risk.

Three of our prosecutors – Fredericka Sargent, Kim D'Avignon, and Emily Kirby, left to right – traveled to Washington, DC, to hear the November 7 arguments in the case at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Remembering Carla Walker



Carla Walker

Fort Worth was rocked in 1974 by the kidnapping, rape, and murder of 17-year-old Carla Walker, a Western Hills High School student.

For years, this crime remained one of the most well-known murders in the city’s history. It went unsolved for decades.

“Everyone knew the Carla Walker case,” Assistant District Attorney Kim D’Avignon said. “It’s one of those cases that will haunt a community.”



Glen McCurley

In 2019, the case was reopened and, using a new cutting-edge DNA testing method, police tracked down and identified Carla Walker’s killer: Glen McCurley, who lived less than a mile from where Walker was kidnapped. He was arrested in 2020 at the age of 77.

D’Avignon and Emily Dixon tried McCurley in August 2021. On the third day of the trial, McCurley changed his plea to guilty and was sentenced to life in prison for capital murder. He died in prison during the summer of 2023.

The DNA testing that brought McCurley to justice is called Forensic Genetic Genealogy, or FGG. It’s continuing to draw attention as a way to bring many other criminals to justice.

DA Sorrells said this technology “is a game changer” that brings victims’ families hope.

“We’re not giving up on any case,” Sorrells said. “We are excited about FGG. We’re ready to be in court and present this evidence so that we can hold people accountable for what they’ve done wrong.”



U.S. Sen. John Cornyn wants to make sure that other families don’t have to wait as long for justice as Carla Walker’s family did.

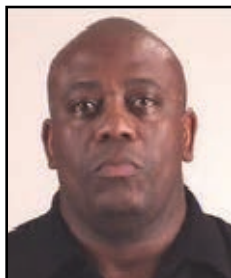
He has proposed the Carla Walker Act, a measure that earmarks federal funding for advanced Forensic Genetic Genealogy DNA testing to help solve cold cases that might otherwise never be resolved.

“There’s a lot of cases this technology can be applied to,” Cornyn said. “This can bring closure to a family who finally knows what happened to a loved one.”

The Center for Human Identification at the University of North Texas Health Science Center is the first public crime lab in the country to offer this kind of genealogical analysis that combines genealogical mapping and advanced DNA technology.

“We hope to become the go-to cold case center for Texas and eventually the nation,” said Dr. Michael Coble, executive director of HSC’s Center for Human Identification. “Most importantly, it will allow us to assist in unresolved cases, bringing solutions to families that have had to wait far too long for answers about their loved ones.”

Pro Se



Less than 15 minutes.

That’s how long a Tarrant County jury took in October to find **Rickey Wayne Edwards**, 54, guilty of the capital murder of his wife Portia Williams-Edwards and stepson Kameion Kitchen.

He received an automatic sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Edwards represented himself in the trial, although he had two “standby” attorneys to help if he needed or wanted them. A defendant has the right to represent himself.

Edwards spent hours telling jurors about the deadly day on May 3, 2020, when he and his wife were moving into their new home.

That day, his wife called her father and son saying Edwards was acting crazy. She said he hit her, pulled a gun on her, and threatened her. Her son drove to the house and confronted Edwards.

Edwards shot Kitchen 10 times with his Glock pistol. He also shot his wife twice in the head.

Tarrant County Assistant District Attorneys Robert Huseman and Melinda Hogan represented the State.

"This case is about family violence, rage and control," Huseman told the jury. "Now, go find us some justice and find him guilty of capital murder."

Hogan told the jury: "This was not self-defense as the defendant claims. The evidence shows beyond a reasonable doubt that he executed Kameion and Portia."



In the waning months of 2023, seven people in addition to Rickey Wayne Edwards were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries. Here’s some information about those cases:



Braylin Brown, 22, was sentenced in November for murder. Brown was in the Tarrant County jail when he ordered a hit on his father, who was shot and killed outside his home on January 25, 2022.



Lovo Graves, 43, was sentenced in November for manslaughter. On May 7, 2022, Graves was driving his Dodge Ram pickup faster than 90 mph in a 45-mph zone when he t-boned a GMC pickup truck turning into the Rose Hill Cemetery. Killed were Lauren Richardson, 19, and Kennedy Young, 18, who were going to the cemetery to leave flowers on their grandmother’s grave for Mother’s Day.

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Keith Haynes, 33, was sentenced in December for the capital murder of his ex-girlfriend Kenishia Walker, who was pregnant with his child. On April 14, 2017, he shot and killed Walker, 25, in her bed at her

Arlington home. Her 8-year-old son discovered her body.



Jillian Johnson, 44, pled guilty in October to killing mother and daughter Gloria Prince, 71, and Gloria Booker, 53. On October 25, 2020, Johnson was living at the home of Prince and her daughter in Grand Prairie. When told to

move out due to her behavior, Johnson became angry and stabbed both women to death.



Edward James Murray, 57, was sentenced in November for murder. On September 17, 2020, Murray went to the home of his neighbor Antonio Edward Robinson complaining about toys in their shared walkway. He threw the toys

at Robinson's door until Robinson came outside. Murray shot and killed him.



Lucious Newhouse III, 59, was sentenced in September for murdering a woman and dumping her body in Sulphur Springs. Newhouse killed Rochelle Mims, 34, by shooting her in the head at their Fort Worth home. Her body

was found in an open field on private property more than 100 miles northeast of Fort Worth.



Kevin Norris, 43, was sentenced in October for the continuous sexual assault of a child. He repeatedly sexually assaulted his stepdaughter starting when she was 8 years old and continuing until she was 15.



Tyrico Simpson, 22, was sentenced in September to two life sentences, which the judge ordered to be served consecutively, for aggravated robbery and burglary of a habitation with intent to commit aggravated assault. The jury also

ordered Simpson to pay two \$10,000 fines. On September 6, 2019, Simpson and another man went to the apartment of Anthony Brown, 27, and attacked him with a rock and a knife. While he lay on the floor bleeding, Simpson and his accomplice took a gun and drugs from the apartment.

Citizen Prosecutor Academy



Congratulations to the graduating class of the Fall Citizen Prosecutor Academy. They spent the last three months getting an insider's perspective on every step of prosecution and how our system of justice works in Tarrant County. DA Sorrells proudly presented each participant with a certificate of completion.

By the Numbers

Some serious crimes don't measure up to a life sentence, but juries still assess significant prison time to ensure justice is served.

99 **Felizardo Perez**, 58, was convicted and sentenced by a jury in August to 99 years in prison for the continuous sexual abuse of a child under the age of 14. Perez repeatedly sexually abused multiple members of his family, including his own granddaughter, for many years.



87 **Don Michael Snider**, 68, was found guilty and sentenced by a jury in September to 87 years in prison for the aggravated sexual assault of a disabled individual/elderly and prohibited sexual contact. On October 23, 2021, Snider sexually assaulted his 87-year-old mother who suffered from dementia and was on hospice at an independent living facility in Pantego.



70 **Raul Espinosa**, 23, was found guilty and sentenced by a jury in November to 70 years in prison for aggravated assault causing serious bodily injury to a family member and injury to a child that caused serious bodily injury. On August 28, 2021, Espinosa and his wife were at their Fort Worth home with their 8-month-old daughter. His wife left their crying baby with him while she took a shower. He couldn't get the baby to stop crying, so he shook her until she was unconscious and unresponsive. The baby is now permanently disabled.



70 **Anthony Tanksley**, 60, was found guilty and sentenced by a jury in November to 70 years in prison for murder. On June 30, 2020, Tanksley was upset that a group of people set off fireworks near his BMW outside his ex-girlfriend's Fort Worth home. He drove away, but returned several minutes later and opened fire inside the house, killing Anthony Richardson and injuring two other men.



60 **Hector Deleon**, 43, was found guilty and sentenced by a jury in September to 60 years in prison for murder. On May 24, 2021, Deleon went into a smoke shop in the Diamond Hill neighborhood and shot and killed fellow customer Christopher Esparza, 34. Deleon has a long history of violent crime and admitted to wounding Esparza during a shooting in 2019.



50 **Arthur Albert Burcie**, 81, was found guilty and sentenced by a jury in October to 50 years in prison for the continuous sexual abuse of a child under the age of 14. Burcie has been sexually assaulting family members for 23 years. He first raped his granddaughter, then three great granddaughters. All the girls were younger than 10 when the assaults happened.



In Our Community

Reaching out to community groups across Tarrant County is a high priority for DA Sorrells. Whether explaining the criminal justice system or creating bonds with service organizations, Sorrells and his prosecutors are sharing information with our citizens.



Sorrells spoke to Arlington high school students who gathered to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Texas Rangers, the nation's oldest law enforcement agency. The event was designed to educate students about the modern Rangers, what they do, and why they are important.



"If you don't remember, then you repeat," Sorrells told a crowd gathered at One Safe Place to remember those who have lost their lives to domestic violence.



Elder Financial Fraud was the talk of the Empowering Seniors Expo at the Hurst Conference Center. DA Investigator Kyle Truly, along with Assistant District Attorneys Nathan Martin and Landon Dickerson, spoke with hundreds of seniors about how to avoid financial fraud and how to get help if they fall victim.



Sorrells rolled up his sleeves to help with the Tarrant County Blood Drive. He was joined by Assistant DA Delonia Watson and others from our office.

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Sorrells opened the Tarrant County Sexual Abuse Advisory Council annual meeting in Fort Worth. About 200 specialists gathered to seek ways of improving awareness of sexual abuse and services available to victims.



Assistant DA Tim Gilpin taught at the Texas Association of Vehicle Theft training conference in Dallas.



Alliance for Children cut the ribbon at its new Glen Whitley building, enhancing its ability to coordinate investigations in partnership with law enforcement and Sorrells.



Assistant DA Glynis McGinty, far left, organized the Fort Worth Republican Women's Club to donate stuffed animals to the DA's Victim Services unit, the Fort Worth Police Department, Fire Department, and the Tarrant County Family District Court.

Recognition




Assistant DA Lori Varnell received this year's Unsung Hero Award from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. She was recognized for her dedication to prosecuting those who financially exploit our vulnerable citizens in their golden years.



Unbound Now recognized Assistant DA Lindy Borchardt with its Three Key Award, honoring her for prosecuting human trafficking cases and seeking justice for Tarrant County victims and their families. Unbound Now is a nonprofit organization dedicated to mobilizing communities to respond to human trafficking.



The DA's office team at the annual Blue Tie and Boots formal ball for the Brotherhood for the Fallen.



Editorial
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