

The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - Tarrant County District Attorney

Spring 2025



A Message from DA Phil Sorrells



2025 is starting off strong.

By the first week of March, 11 defendants in Tarrant County – murderers, pedophiles, robbers, and rapists – had been sentenced to life in prison this year.

We are fighting hard to keep our community safe, taking tough cases to trial, and building on successes my office has achieved.

Read about some of our recent accomplishments in our 2024 Annual Report.

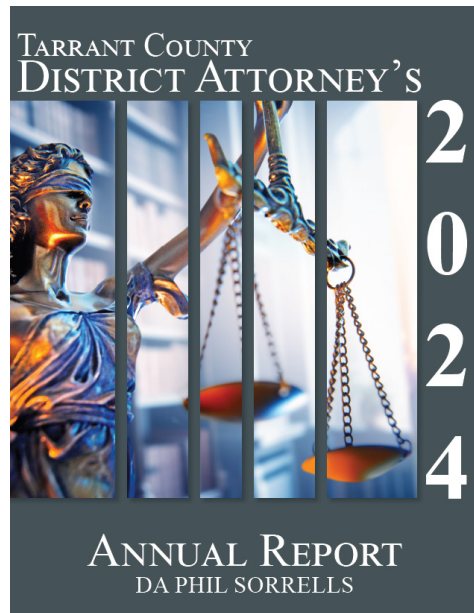
The report details how, last year, we prosecuted 24 cases in which defendants were sentenced to life in prison and three in which defendants were given the death penalty.

It also notes that my office took 322 cases to trial, disposed of 57,212 cases, and handled more than 2,600 public information requests.

To read about our hard work, visit our website at cda.tarrantcountytx.gov and click on Publications.

We are going to do even more great things this year.

We will never stop fighting for justice.



The Executive Team

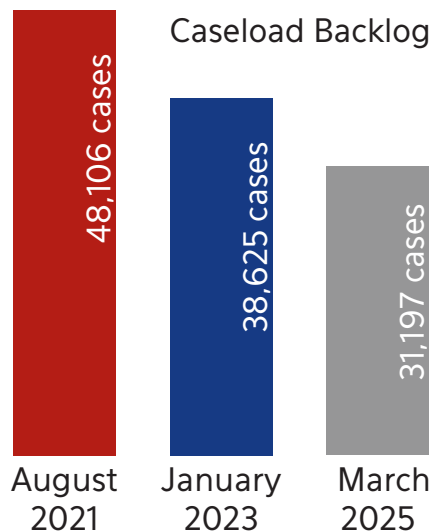
Here's the team that guides the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office.

In addition to DA Sorrells and First Assistant DA Robb Catalano, others who have decades of legal experience are Criminal Division Chief Rose Anna Salinas, Civil Division Chief Craig Price, Chief Investigator Don Pilcher, and Chief of Staff Jason Peters.



From left to right, Don Pilcher, Jason Peters, Rose Anna Salinas, Phil Sorrells, Robb Catalano, Craig Price.

By the Numbers



DA Sorrells continues with his mission to reduce the caseload that grew in the criminal courts under Covid restrictions.

Here's a look at the progress.

The backlog was at its peak in August 2021, with 48,106 cases.

In January 2023, 38,625 cases were pending in the Tarrant County criminal courts. By March 2025, that number was down to 31,197.

Stopping Child Pornography



Assistant DA Lori Varnell testified before the Texas Senate Committee on Criminal Justice this year.

Child pornography has long been a problem in Texas.

It has gotten worse in recent years as offenders use artificial intelligence to create more child pornography.

Texas lawmakers have worked on legislation to address the problem in the past, but many offenders found loopholes. Now Tarrant County Assistant DA Lori Varnell is working with state lawmakers and Lt. Governor Dan Patrick to find a solution that will work.

"Child pornography doesn't satisfy an appetite," Varnell said. "It whets it. Our children are worth protecting."

In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, ruled that it's an unconstitutional violation of free speech for laws to prohibit child pornography that doesn't involve an image of a real child.

Varnell, who last year testified before the Texas Senate Criminal Justice Committee, said a multi-faceted approach – including targeting those who create child pornography under the organized crime statute as well as using the obscenity standards – may be what's needed.

Other potential ways to attack the problem could be increasing the penalty for possession of child pornography based upon the nature of the victim depicted.

Varnell submitted proposed wording for legislation to the Texas Senate Committee on Criminal Justice and testified about the need for changes in Texas law.

State legislators have filed several bills addressing AI-created child pornography.

The Texas Legislature will remain in session until June 2.

“Let’s Ride, Warden”

On February 5, 2025, the family of Pastor Clinton Dobson finally received justice.

Nearly 14 years after Dobson was beaten and suffocated to death at Arlington’s NorthPointe Baptist Church, where he led the congregation, his killer – Steven Lawayne Nelson – was executed.

Nelson’s last words did not include anything about Dobson or Judy Elliott, the church secretary he beat so badly that her husband couldn’t recognize her.

“It is what it is,” Nelson said.

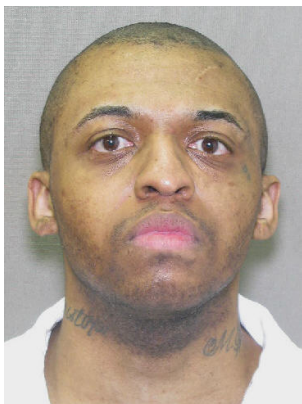
“I’m not scared. I’m at peace,” he said. “Let’s ride, Warden.”

After he killed Dobson and beat Elliott, Nelson stole Elliott’s car and other items including a laptop and credit cards. He sold the laptop and used the credit cards to buy clothes and jewelry, as seen on video surveillance footage.

Nelson said his friends were responsible for killing Dobson. But blood spatter on his shoes was a DNA match for Dobson and Elliott. Nelson’s fingerprints were found at the church and distinctive white metal studs from the belt Nelson was wearing when he was arrested were found on and around Dobson’s body.



Pastor Clinton Dobson



Steven Lawayne Nelson

A Tarrant County jury on October 16, 2012, sentenced Nelson to death for murdering Dobson.

Dobson was 28 when he died.

Nelson was 37.

“The death penalty is reserved for the worst of the worst,” DA Sorrells said. “Steven Nelson was one of them. He was a career criminal, and the death penalty was the only feasible option for him.”

Getting Life

Between January and the first week of March, 11 people were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries or judges. Here's a look at their cases.

Jay Shawn Nixon-Clark, 19



Nixon-Clark was found guilty of capital murder for killing two people in 2022. On August 28, 2022, Nixon-Clark and others drove through a neighborhood in northwest Fort Worth and parked their car. For more than three minutes, they watched a

house on Steel Dust Drive where teenagers and children played in the garage with the door up. Nixon-Clark and another male got out of the car, carrying guns and wearing masks, and ran to the house. They fired more than a dozen shots, ran back to their car, and drove off. Jamarrien Monroe, 17, and his cousin, Rayshard Javon Scott, 5, were killed. Other family members, including Monroe's 18-month-old son, were injured.

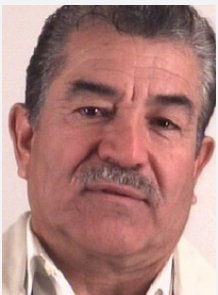
Prosecutors: Bill Vassar, Melinda Hogan.

Investigator: Danny Nutt.

Victim Coordinators: Imelda Lopez, Laura Medina.

January 14, 2025.

Federico Amaya, 58



Amaya was found guilty of continuous sexual abuse of a child under the age of 14. On January 16, 2022, an 11-year-old girl told her mother that Amaya, a relative, had been sexually abusing her for a year.

Amaya told the girl he would "hurt her" if she told anyone about the abuse.

Prosecutors: Steven Elliott, Erika Staif.

Investigator: Tiffany Johnson.

Victim Coordinator: Imelda Lopez.

January 24, 2025.

Joe Tiner, 65



Tiner was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault of a child. In 2020, one of Tiner's female relatives told Fort Worth Police detectives that Tiner sexually assaulted her multiple times when she was between the ages of 4 and 12. The abuse

started in 2005. Investigators learned that multiple female relatives had been sexually abused by Tiner when they were younger.

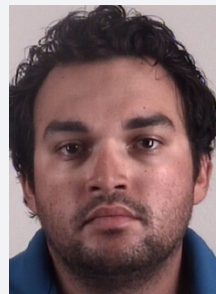
Prosecutors: Deanna Franzen, Gill Clements.

Investigator: Scott Giovannelli.

Victim Coordinator: Candace Burnett.

February 4, 2025.

Joseph Aparicio, 31



Aparicio pled guilty to murder. On March 23, 2023, Fort Worth Police found Janeecia Mason's body under the Precinct Line Road bridge, next to the Trinity River. She had been shot twice in the head.

Police used surveillance footage, cell phone data, and witness statements to determine Aparicio killed Mason. Her clothes and blood were found in his bedroom in Haltom City. He also murdered another woman in Denton County in 2022 and will spend life in prison for that crime as well.

Prosecutors: Bill Vassar, Allenna Bangs.

Investigator: Matt Hardy.

Victim Coordinator: Candace Burnett.

February 7, 2025.

Getting Life

Cedric Whitaker, 20



Whitaker was placed on probation for aggravated robbery and, within four months, he sexually assaulted a woman at a hotel. Based on the sexual assault, our office sought to have Whitaker's probation revoked. After

hearing the evidence about the sexual assault, the court revoked Whitaker's probation and sentenced him to life in prison.

Prosecutors: Tad Schmidt, Ross Van de Kop.

Investigator: Annabelle Amon.

Victim Coordinator: Laura Medina.

February 19, 2025.

Albert Gonzalez, 29



Gonzalez was found guilty of capital murder for fatally shooting a game room clerk during a robbery. On March 4, 2021, Gonzalez and an accomplice were dropped off at the 5D Smoke Shop and Game Room on Altamesa Boulevard.

Once inside, Gonzalez pulled out a firearm and pointed it at 37-year-old Mahmoud Ghanim of Arlington. Ghanim raised his hands and attempted to push the gun away; Gonzalez shot him in the torso, killing him. After the murder, Gonzalez and his accomplice stole money and cell phones from other patrons in the game room. They rifled through Ghanim's pockets, stealing cash, and took a bag of money from the game room. After the robbery and shooting, Gonzalez and his accomplice fled the scene and had their driver take them back to their hotel, where they divided up the stolen money.

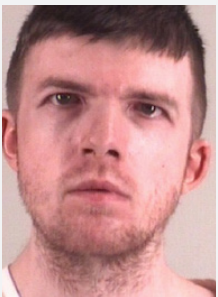
Prosecutors: Chase Payne, Tim Rodgers.

Investigator: Danny Nutt.

Victim Coordinator: Laura Medina.

February 26, 2025.

Kaleb Nix, 26



Nix pled guilty to the continuous sexual abuse of a child under the age of 14. Nix was hired by numerous families to babysit their children between 2018 and 2023. Arlington Police received an online tip in

2023 that Nix was in possession of child pornography. Officers investigated and found that Nix committed acts of sexual abuse on 15 of the children he babysat. The age of his victims ranged from 1 year old to 9 years old.

Prosecutor: Steven Elliott.

Investigator: Brent Ezelle.

Victim Coordinator: Carma Anderson.

February 21, 2025.

Getting Life

Christopher Giles, 39



Giles was found guilty of continuous sexual abuse of a child under 14. In January 2024, a 7-year-old family member of Giles made an outcry of sexual abuse. Giles sexually assaulted the young girl multiple times when she was between the

ages of 4 and 7. Law enforcement also found child pornography of the victim on Giles' phone. Giles, a registered sex offender, was previously convicted in Oklahoma of lewd molestation. In that case, he sexually assaulted his 7-year-old cousin.

Prosecutors: Marina Thomas, Erika Staif.

Investigator: Tiffany Johnson.

Victim Coordinator: Laura Medina.

February 26, 2025.

Richard Guerra, 42



Guerra was found guilty of continuous sexual abuse of a child under 14 and possession of child pornography. Guerra sexually abused a 13-year-old girl multiple times between July 2021 and December

2021. The jury also learned that Guerra was in possession of child pornography of the victim. He previously was convicted of kidnapping in 2010.

Prosecutors: Madeline Jones, Sarah Sherman.

Investigators: Jose Fonseca, Patrick Knotts.

Victim Coordinator: Cecilia Jones.

February 28, 2025.

Jose Luis Moreno Castaneda, 46



Castaneda was found guilty of murder. About 4 a.m. October 30, 2022, the body of Evila Yanes was found facedown in a parking lot along North Cooper Street in Arlington. She died of blunt force trauma to the head. Yanes, 44, and Moreno

Castaneda had a lengthy dating relationship and were seen together on surveillance cameras hours before her body was found. Moreno Castaneda, who had a history of domestic violence, was on probation for previously assaulting Yanes by dousing her with gasoline. His DNA was found on several items, including a beer bottle, at the crime scene.

Prosecutors: Allenna Bangs, Kate Hinojosa.

Investigator: Kristina Gonzalez.

Victim Coordinators: Candace Burnett, Carrie Farley.

March 3, 2025.

Kevin Espinal, 30



Espinal was found guilty of continuous sexual assault of a child under 14 and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. Espinal sexually assaulted several young relatives over the course of many

years. He admitted to sending inappropriate photos to one of the victims and admitted to having bad thoughts about young children. The jury also learned Espinal was a registered sex offender, convicted of indecency with a child-sexual contact in 2014. He was deported to Honduras and re-entered the United States illegally and then committed the additional sexual offenses against children.

Prosecutors: Kyle Russo, Brittane Hamilton.

Investigator: Jose Fonseca.

Victim Coordinator: Elizabeth Garcia.

March 6, 2025.

In Our Community

DA Sorrells, along with prosecutors and investigators, meet with community groups in Tarrant County, explaining how our office works or helping with community efforts. Here's a look at some recent community outreach by DA staffers.



Several of our prosecutors helped as judges in a high school criminal mock trial competition. Thank you, Sydney Brock, Emily Dixon, Emily Ledford, Matt Hinojosa, Sarah Sherman, Katie Owens, and D.J. Estes.



DA Sorrells honored retiring North Richland Hills Police Chief Mike Young on his 40 years of service.

Post Conviction Assistant DA Tori Ford Oblon spoke about jury charges – from how to prepare them to the importance of reviewing the court's proposed charge before it's given to the jury – to students at Baylor's Law School.



In Our Community



A group of our Assistant District Attorneys had a great time at the annual "Let's Play Bingo" Ladies Luncheon fundraiser for Alliance for Children. Alliance for Children is a vital partner of our office.

Assistant DA Samantha Bush taught students at Great Hearts Academy in Arlington about the role prosecutors play in the criminal justice system.

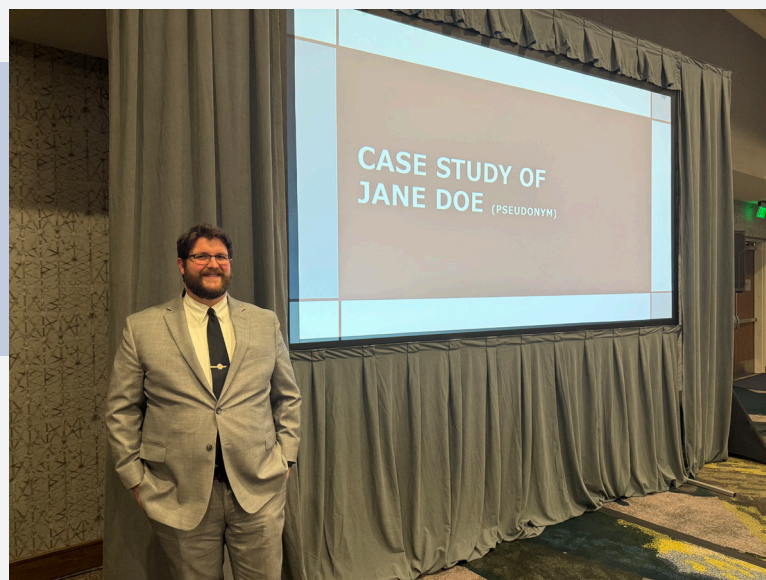


SENATE COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Assistant DA Allenna Bangs testified before the Senate Committee on Criminal Justice about a bill geared to reform the bail system and prevent violent offenders from being released before their trials.

In Our Community

Assistant DA Kyle Morris explained the difficulties and lessons learned from a high-stakes case of juvenile infanticide. He served on a panel at the 38th Annual Texas Juvenile Law Conference.



Assistant DA Stephanie Simpson talked about an aggravated sexual assault case where the abuser was found guilty and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Assistant DA Kim D'Avignon helped share the message to future doctors that patients who have been sexually assaulted must be properly cared for to avoid traumatizing them further. That was the message from a panel that included D'Avignon, doctors from JPS and Baylor Scott & White, advocates from The Women's Center, SANE nurses from Texas Health Resources and UNTHSC, and a fellow medical student who also is a rape crisis advocate.



In Memory



Our office lost a treasured friend and colleague when Victim Services Director Allison Attles Bowen passed away in late February.

She began working here as a victim assistance coordinator in 2016 and, by 2019, was promoted to Director of Victim Services to guide that division.

Rarely seen without a smile on her face, Allison “has been our rock, our pillar, not only to our Victim Services Team but also to the Victim Liaisons from the local law enforcement agencies. I will be forever grateful to her for her guidance in victim services and for her friendship,” Laura Medina, one of our victim assistance coordinators, said.

In her time with our office, Allison played an integral role in seeking justice. She was dedicated to supporting victims in Tarrant County and her work touched the lives of so many.

She spoke at conferences about the need for victims services and boosted awareness of victims needs through an annual National Crime Victims’ Rights Week event. She found a way to bridge gaps between local Victim Liaisons and the DA’s Victim Services team by holding quarterly meetings.

Allison recently was elected to serve as the 2025 Chair of the Texas District & County Attorneys Association Key Personnel-Victim Services Board and she had been nominated for the Mitch Poe Public Service Award given by the Tarrant County Sexual Abuse Advisory Council.

“Allison was not only a professional but a friend, mentor, and guiding light to so many,” said Cecilia “Cece” Jones, one of our victim assistance coordinators. “We will forever cherish her memory and honor the incredible work she did.”



Before joining the DA’s Office, Allison served as a victim advocate and housing placement specialist for the Day Resource Center in Fort Worth, a residential supervisor for YAI Network in New York, and a supervisor of Family Services for the Serenity House Family Residence in Brooklyn, New York. She also was the HIV/AIDS program coordinator for a medical center in Queens, New York.

We are grateful for the impact Allison had on this office and the community. Our heartfelt condolences go to her friends and family.

“This is a tremendous loss, not only for our office, but for the community we serve,” Assistant DA Fredericka Sargent said. “Allison’s absence will be felt for a long time, but I know she would be proud to know that her team has picked up right where she left off on some important projects, projects that will continue to improve the services we provide to victims.”

Citizen Prosecutor Academy

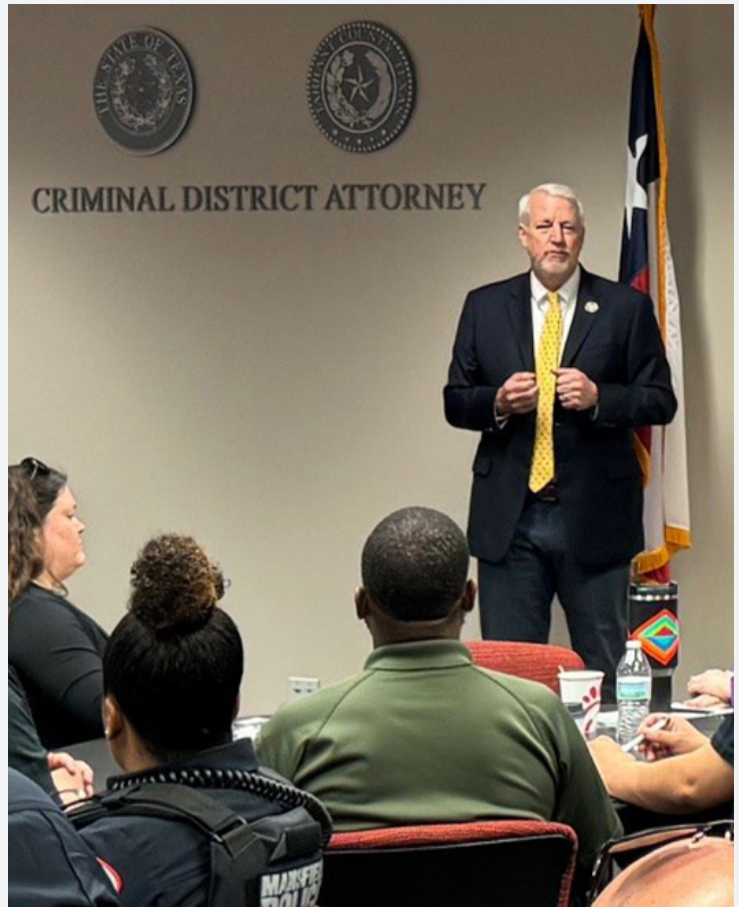
Do you want to learn about the criminal justice system in Tarrant County?

Then join our office's Citizen Prosecutor Academy. We hold it twice a year – once in the Spring and once in the Fall.

You will learn about every step of prosecution, and you'll get an insider's perspective on how the system works. Assistant District Attorneys and Investigators teach the classes. And you get to tour the Tarrant County Corrections Center.

Our Spring class this year is already full, but you can sign up for the Fall class that starts September 4, 2025. Classes meet on Thursdays from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and there's no cost.

For more information about the program, call 817-884-1400 or go online to cda.tarrantcounty.com and click on the Community tab. You can apply online to participate.



Recognition



In February, Assistant DA Amy Allin was appointed by Governor Greg Abbott to the 297th Judicial District Court in Tarrant County. Allin, a felony court chief, began working in this office eight years ago and has prosecuted hundreds of cases. She will replace former Judge David Hagerman, who retired from the position earlier this year.

The appointment requires Texas Senate confirmation and the term will expire December 31, 2026.



Editorial

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