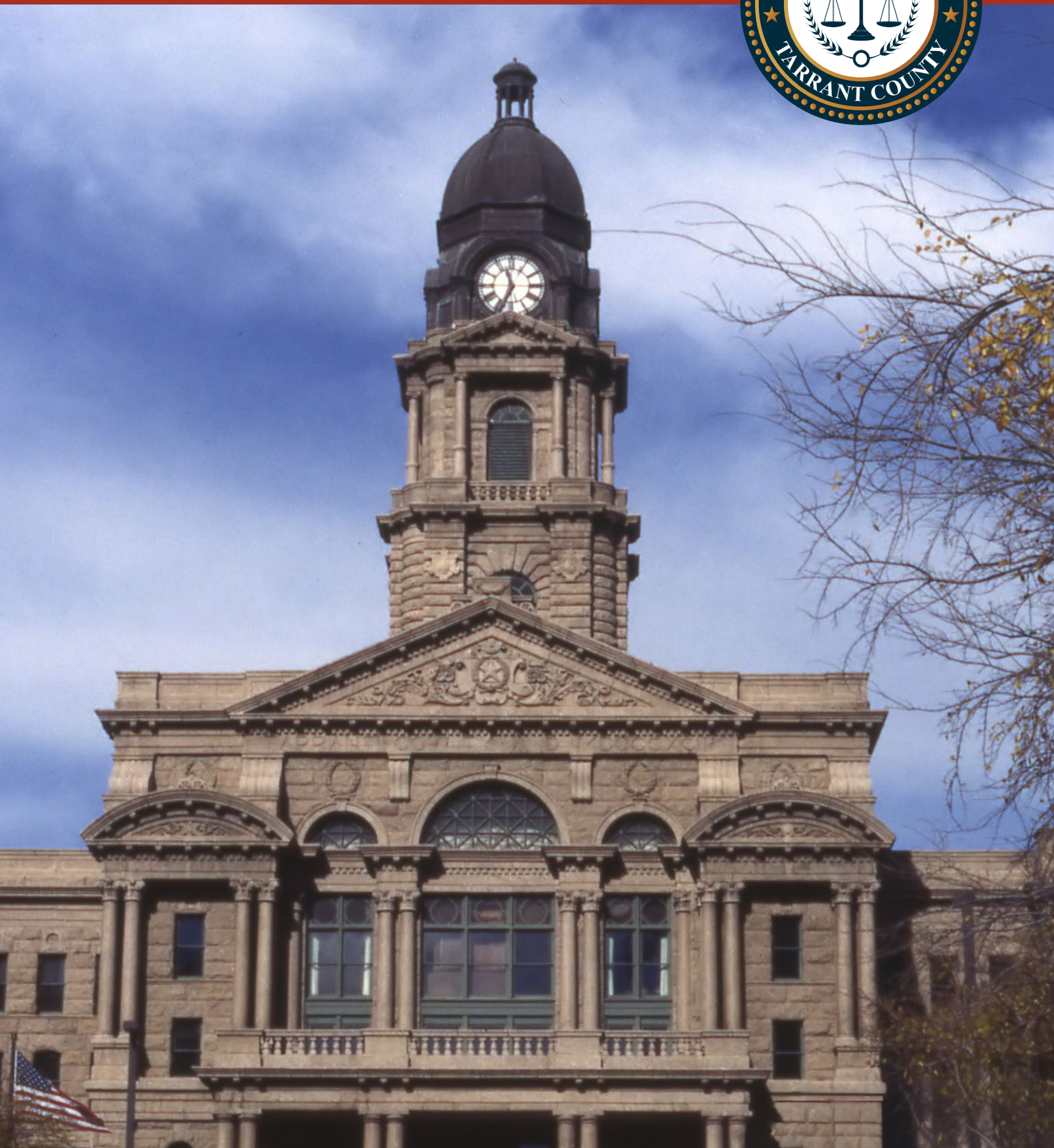


The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - Tarrant County District Attorney

Fall 2026



A Message from DA Phil Sorrells



Three days.

Four life sentences.

Tarrant County juries and judges delivered a clear message in August: those who commit murder, capital murder, or sexually abuse children will be held fully accountable.

Here's what happened:

August 19 – Frederick Spears, 57

Sentenced to life in prison without parole after being found guilty of capital murder. He stabbed his estranged wife multiple times, including once in the heart, on September 22, 2025. The jury returned its verdict in 17 minutes.

August 20 – David Johnson, 43

Sentenced to life in prison without parole for aggravated sexual assault of a child. Johnson sexually assaulted a six-year-old girl three days after being released from prison in 2025.

August 20 – Sundall Barnes, 23

Sentenced to life in prison for murder. On August 30, 2024, Barnes shot and killed Zoin Hodges, 20, outside the Shady Grove Car Wash in Arlington.

August 21 – Tai Vaega, 36

Sentenced to life in prison without parole for the continuous sexual abuse of a child. A 14-year-old girl revealed that Vaega, a family member, had been sexually assaulting her since she was nine years old.

These are only a few of the hard cases our office prosecutes.

Every day, we fight for justice.

And every day, we're making a difference.

By The Numbers

District Attorney Phil Sorrells continues his mission to drive down the massive caseload that built up in Tarrant County's criminal courts during COVID restrictions. The progress is clear.

- At its peak in August 2021, the backlog stood at 48,106 cases.
- By January 2023, when Sorrells took office, that number had dropped to 38,625.
- As of September 1, 2026, the backlog is down to 30,249.

A First



The first jury trial under Texas's strengthened Organized Retail Theft statute took place here in Tarrant County.

In June, a jury found Winston Love, 28, guilty of organized retail theft with a deadly weapon and sentenced him to 45 years in prison.

Over 45 days in 2025, Love targeted multiple Target stores, stealing more than 200 LEGO sets, about a dozen coffee makers, several vacuum cleaners, and a handful of PlayStation controllers. In total, Love stole more than \$30,000 in merchandise.

On October 27, 2025, he ran out of a Mansfield Target at 7:40 a.m. after a loss prevention officer called him by name. He sped off, at times driving on the wrong side of the road and putting other motorists, including children riding on school buses, in danger.

We're grateful to the Target Loss Prevention Team – and the police departments in Euless, Grapevine, Mansfield, and Watauga – for their work on this case and for their commitment to keeping our communities safe.

The strengthened Organized Retail Theft statute applies to crimes committed on or after September 1, 2025.

Assistant District Attorneys Dylan Campbell and Lori Varnell prosecuted this case. DA Investigator Ryan Holland also worked on this case.

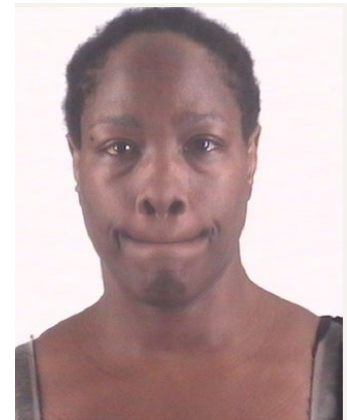
Justice & Forgiveness

For the Sneed family, August 13th was about justice.

And forgiveness.

That's the day – seven years after 9-year-old Melodi Sneed was suffocated – that her aunt, 47-year-old Mercia Sneed, was found guilty by a Tarrant County jury of capital murder and injury to a child causing serious bodily injury. She received two life sentences, one without the possibility of parole.

After the sentence was announced, a family member read messages from relatives to Mercia Sneed:



Mercia Sneed

"I forgive you. I don't want to spend my time on Earth with hatred in my heart."

"God can and will forgive you."

"I hope you heal from whatever hate you have in your heart."

"By God's word and instruction, we have forgiven you."

On July 27, 2019, Sneed went to her brother's new home in Mansfield, where family members had gathered to help unpack and celebrate the move.

Late that night, after family members had gone to sleep, she was in the game room where Melodi had fallen asleep on a couch. She told her 13-year-old son to leave the room.

Once he was down the hallway, Sneed picked up a blue-and-white pillow and pressed it over Melodi's face for several minutes, using her body weight to keep the child from moving.

The pillow muffled Melodi's attempts to scream.

"She fought. She screamed. She tried to stay alive," Assistant District Attorney Victoria Lydahl, who prosecuted the case with Assistant District Attorney Charlie Boulware, told the jury. "But she was only nine."

When Melodi stopped struggling, Sneed lifted the pillow, wiped her niece's face, and carried the pillow out of the house.

Hours later, Melodi was found unresponsive and police were called. Sneed's son told officers he saw his mother smother his cousin.

Sneed later admitted to suffocating Melodi.

"Today is about Melodi," Boulware said during closing arguments. "Melodi's family has waited seven years, seven long years."

"We are asking for a swift verdict for Melodi's family and for Melodi."

DA Investigator Matt Hardy and Victim Coordinator Elizabeth Garcia also worked on this case.

“Slaughtered and Left for Dead”

Less than 20 minutes.

That’s how long it took a Tarrant County jury to find Frederick Spears, 57, guilty of capital murder for killing his estranged wife. He received an automatic sentence of life in prison without parole.

“The jury spoke for Tarrant County, returning their verdict in a mere 17 minutes,” District Attorney Phil Sorrells said. “We stand with victims and we hold violent criminals accountable.”

On September 22, 2025, Frederick Spears went to the Arlington home of his estranged wife, 53-year-old Mary Spears, and stabbed her multiple times, killing her.

“She was slaughtered and left for dead,” said Assistant District Attorney Allenna Bangs, who prosecuted the case with Assistant District Attorney Chase Payne.

Just days earlier, Spears had been arrested for threatening a family member with kitchen knives, and an emergency protective order had been issued directing him to stay away from his family.

Spears went out and bought a knife and saw kit – what Payne called “a murder kit” – and returned to the home early in the morning of September 22, 2025.

He waited in the backyard, near the side of the house, until Mary stepped outside.

When she saw him, Payne said she likely uttered her final words: “What took you so long?”

Spears attacked her. Though she weighed only 83 pounds, she tried to defend herself.



Frederick Spears

“She tried to fight back,” Payne told jurors. “She was unsuccessful.”

Spears repeatedly stabbed her, pushing her to the ground before plunging the knife into her heart. Her son later found her unresponsive in the backyard, bleeding from multiple stab wounds.

“He made good on the promise he had been making (to Mary) for years,” Bangs said. “He always said, ‘I’m going to kill you.’”

Police later found Spears behind a church in Arlington. When officers approached, he started stabbing himself and attempted to stab a police K-9. Officers intervened, transported him to the hospital, and then placed him under arrest.

“Find him guilty of capital murder and nothing else,” Payne asked of jurors.

DA Investigator Darla Dowell also worked on this case.

“Depravity on Full Display”

The courtroom fell silent as a Tarrant County jury returned with its sentence for Joel Jones, the former Everman deputy fire chief who pled guilty to aggravated sexual assault.

On June 12, the judge announced the sentence: **life in prison.**

For a moment, the quietness cracked with a few stunned whispers of “Wow” drifting through the gallery.

That verdict capped a week of testimony detailing how Jones, 54, targeted a woman he knew and recruited 31-year-old Tobasia Griffiths through a dating website to rape her. Jones lied to Griffiths, claiming the assault was part of a consensual fantasy.

“One man’s depravity was on full display in the Tarrant County Courthouse,” District Attorney Phil Sorrells said. “After the jury heard all the disgusting acts Jones has committed, it took them a mere 20 minutes to sentence him to life in prison.”

Assistant District Attorneys Kim D’Avignon and Melinda Hogan prosecuted the case.

On February 21, 2025, guided by Jones, Griffiths went to the address Jones provided, entered the victim’s home and bedroom, and violently assaulted her.

The victim fought with everything she had – hitting, kicking, and striking Griffiths with a lamp. She escaped only by convincing him she needed to use the restroom, then ran for her life. Griffiths fled moments later.

“This was a home invasion rape,” Hogan said. “She did not consent.”

Terrified, the victim returned home, locked the doors, and sought help by calling Jones – the very man who had engineered her attack. Jones then phoned 911 and feigned support.



Joel Jones

Evidence showed Jones’s private life was steeped in pornography, cross dressing, drugs, and multiple sex partners. He told Griffiths to record the assault, and Griffiths did – sending the audio straight to Jones. Within days, Jones tried to arrange a second attack. He even talked about having the woman kidnapped and raped.

Jones repeatedly said he wanted to break the woman, a devout Catholic, to shatter the faith that grounded her.

“There is evil in our world, and it’s sitting right there,” D’Avignon told the jury, pointing at Jones. “He wanted to take the most precious part of her and break it. We cannot have that in our community.”

“We proudly ask for a life sentence,” D’Avignon said. “There has never been any more evil than has walked in this room.”

Griffiths also pled guilty to aggravated sexual assault and cooperated in the case against Jones. DA Investigator Timothy Pinckney and Victim Coordinator Cece Jones also worked on the case.

DA: Clean Up or We'll Shut You Down

Right off Interstate 35 in south Fort Worth lies an area overwhelmed by crime.

Two motels – the Super 7 Inn and the Delux Inn – sit side by side, and together they've generated nearly 1,700 police calls for service between January 2024 and mid-May 2026.

District Attorney Phil Sorrells says the situation has gone on far too long.

On June 23, our office filed public nuisance lawsuits to force the owners to clean up these motels – or shut them down entirely.

"The level of crime coming out of these motels is unacceptable and out of control," Sorrells said. "They are a danger to the public and a drain on first responders in this county."

"Protecting this community is my top priority."

The filings spell out what's been happening at both locations:

Super 7 Inn – 4433 South Freeway

From January 1, 2024, to May 11, 2026, Fort Worth police received 755 calls from this location. Officers made 27 arrests tied to 39 criminal offenses, including narcotics violations, weapons violations, aggravated assaults, criminal mischief cases, and criminal trespass.

Delux Inn – 4451 South Freeway

During that same period, officers received 933 calls from this location. Police made 47 arrests for 71 offenses, including narcotics violations, weapons violations, aggravated assaults, criminal trespass, and robberies.

Other recurring crimes at these motels include prostitution, unlawful carrying of a weapon, and disorderly conduct.

At a June press conference, Sorrells delivered a clear warning to the motel owners:

"You need to get control of your property," he said. "If you don't, we're going to shut you down."



Cracking Cases Digitally

Behind the scenes, there's a team in our office that plays a critical role in many cases.

That team is DFATS – our Digital Forensic and Technology Services Unit – which provides forensic analysis of all types of digital media evidence.

Their work includes extracting data from computers or cell phones, reviewing surveillance footage, searching for information on laptops and external drives – and so much more.

As our world becomes increasingly technology driven, the demand for DFATS expertise continues to grow.

Their skills are so specialized that they often are asked to assist with cases in other counties and for some state investigative agencies.

"DFATS may work behind the scenes, but the impact of their work is front and center in how we pursue justice," said Rose Anna Salinas, Chief of our Criminal Division. "Their careful digital work strengthens cases, protects victims, and makes sure offenders are held accountable."

Here's a look at some of the work our DFATS Unit has done.

Juvenile Threat Investigation

A school seized the cell phone of a juvenile who made threats against the campus. While reviewing the device, our investigator uncovered additional messages from other children discussing plans to murder others or gather weapons and was able to identify one of them.

Aggravated Assault Investigation

A potential suspect was arrested in 2023 after an unconscious victim was found in a hotel. Although initially no charges had been filed, one of our investigators realized the suspect's mobile device had never been examined and was still in evidence at the police department. DFATS extracted and analyzed data, uncovering evidence that led to the suspect's arrest and indictment for aggravated assault causing serious bodily injury two years after the victim's death.

Micro SD Video Evidence Recovery

DFATS was asked by a local agency to examine micro SD cards for video evidence of threats and physical assaults, including aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. The work was slow and meticulous, requiring each file to be manually converted for viewing. Ultimately, our investigators recovered multiple videos documenting an ongoing pattern of physical assault and continued threats involving a deadly weapon.

Hidden Camera Case

A woman discovered a hidden camera in a dressing room. Our investigator examined the device and, by recovering deleted videos, identified a male employee as the suspect and uncovered additional victims.

Art from the Heart

There are few things Paul Vigiletti loves more than painting.

Birds, flowers, butterflies, and streetscapes come to life on his canvases, each piece bursting with color. For Paul, art isn't just a hobby. It's a gift he happily shares with others.

The longtime volunteer in our Victim Services Division – who paints despite being colorblind – was overjoyed to learn earlier this year that about 35 of his paintings would be displayed at the Hurst Library.

"It's so great to get it up there," he said with a smile. "I love it!"

For years, Paul's artwork has brightened our office, especially the individual spaces of our victim coordinators. But what makes his art even more meaningful is the thought behind it.

Paul asked each coordinator to name their favorite flower.

Then he painted it for them.

Christi Garcia, our new Victim Services director, chose a blue Gerbera daisy and a golden sunflower.

"The time and thoughtfulness he showed meant a lot and made me feel appreciated in my new role," Garcia said.

Beyond putting beauty on the walls, Paul – along with Pamela Morin and Mary Meador – has been a steady, compassionate presence in our office since 2018. After completing our Citizen Prosecutor Academy, they joined our Victim Assistance team and have faithfully volunteered ever since.

One day each week, they assist with written notifications to victims, help connect families to community resources, monitor the victim lounge, organize snacks, and offer support under the guidance of our Victim Assistance Coordinators.



Together they have given our office more than 5,000 volunteer hours through the years.

They make an impact through the quiet encouragement they offer.

Sometimes it's through a listening ear.

Other times it's through petals painted with care.

Captured



In 1999, Maria Narez was indicted for capital murder in the 1996 death of her 3-year-old daughter, Cassandra White.

Before the case could go to trial in Tarrant County, Narez fled and remained a fugitive for decades.

On August 8, 2026, Narez, now 48, was found in Mexico and arrested.

Our office never stopped pursuing her return to face the charge and answer for her daughter's death.

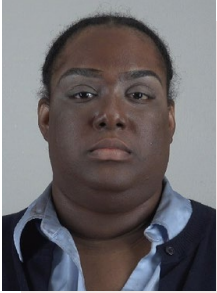
We recognize the critical work of Mexico Interpol, the U.S. Marshals Mexico Foreign Field Office, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Justice-Office of International Affairs, DA Investigators Tiffany Johnson and Victor Espino-Nevarez, and Assistant DA Steven Elliott.

Their relentless efforts ensured that this decades old case — and the pursuit of justice — were never forgotten.

Getting Life

From June 1 to September 1, six additional defendants – beyond Joel Jones, Mercia Sneed, and Frederick Spears – were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries or judges.

Here's a look at their cases.



Keila Nix, 31, was found guilty of serious bodily injury to a child. In May 2024, police and paramedics responded to a call of an unresponsive four-year-old girl. When they arrived, they learned the girl – who was in Nix's care – was severely emaciated. Her body was completely covered in bruises and scars. The child was pronounced dead upon arriving at the hospital. Prosecutors Sydney Brock, Olivia Stoner. Investigator Tiffany Johnson. August 4, 2026.



Xavier Bass, 29, pled guilty to murdering his father. On June 28, 2024, Xavier drove from Georgia to his dad's home in Fort Worth. His father, Gene Bass, 54, was a retired master sergeant in the U.S. Army and a JROTC teacher for Crowley ISD. Xavier parked his Ford Mustang, walked up to his father with a pistol, and opened fire – chasing him as he tried to run. Xavier shot him 12 times, killing him. Two rounds went into Gene's head. Xavier, who planned this attack for months, then got in his car, drove back to Georgia, and was arrested the next day. Prosecutors Ashlea Deener, Anthony Salinas. Investigator Caleb Blank. Victim Coordinators Laura Medina, Christi Garcia. August 6, 2026.



David Johnson, 43, was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault of a child and was sentenced to life in prison without parole. Just three days after being released from prison in October 2025, Johnson sexually assaulted a six-year-old girl. He previously was in prison for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. Prosecutors Sydney Brock, Olivia Stoner. Investigator Tiffany Johnson. Victim Coordinator Elizabeth Garcia. August 20, 2026.

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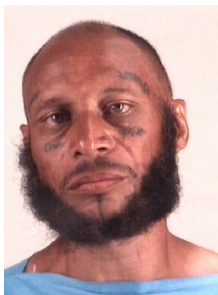
Getting Life



Sundall Barnes, 23, was found guilty of murder. On August 30, 2024, Barnes shot and killed Zoin Hodges, 20, outside of the Shady Grove Car Wash in Arlington. Several casings and a brown cigar were located near Hodges's body. One week after the murder, Barnes was arrested during a traffic stop in possession of a firearm that was later linked to the casings left at the scene. DNA also linked Barnes to the cigar near Hodges's body. The Court sentenced Barnes to life in prison. Prosecutors Stephanie Simpson, Katherine Messina. Investigator Lee Blaisdell. Victim Coordinator Laura Medina. August 20, 2026.



Tai Vaega, 36, was found guilty of continuous sexual abuse of a child and was sentenced to life in prison without parole. A 14-year-old girl reported in 2023 that Vaega, a family member, had been sexually assaulting her since she was nine. Vaega fled to New Zealand in August 2024 to avoid prosecution. Working with New Zealand authorities, our office secured his extradition. He was captured in January 2025 and returned to the United States. Prosecutors Brianna Bustamante, Courtney Mowdy. Investigator Kevin Hilliard. Victim Coordinator Carma Anderson. August 21, 2026.



Steven Black, 48, was found guilty of murder. On July 9, 2025, Black threw Susan Watkins, 50, to the ground in the 900 block of South Jennings Avenue. He stomped on her head with his feet, threw large rocks at her head, and left her body behind a dumpster. She was taken to the hospital where she later died. Prosecutors Tim Rodgers, Grayson Ezzell. Investigator Scott Giovannelli. Victim Coordinator Elizabeth Garcia. August 27, 2026.

The Community Board

District Attorney Phil Sorrells and our staff meet with groups in Tarrant County and across the state. Here's a look at some of our recent community involvement.



DA Sorrells spoke to a real estate group in Fort Worth, noting that Tarrant County juries have handed out around 100 life sentences since he took office in 2023.

Assistant DAs Chase Payne, Kim D'Avignon, Allenna Bangs, Madeline Jones, and Stephanie Simpson were honored to attend the 33rd Annual Genesis Women's Shelter & Support Luncheon – a gathering dedicated to ending domestic violence and lifting up survivors. The event featured Mariska Hargitay, actress, producer, and founder of the Joyful Heart Foundation, whose work has helped transform how the nation responds to sexual assault and domestic violence.



The Community Board



Assistant DA Stephanie Simpson spoke at the Crimes Against Women Conference in Dallas with crime survivor Ashleigh Persons. They gave an inside look into the case against Matthew Osborn, who attacked Ashleigh, and the impact trial preparation has on victims.

DA Sorrells joined other DAs on a panel hosted by the North Texas Crime Commission in July. It was a great opportunity for him to talk about the challenges our office faces every day and the progress we're making in holding offenders accountable.



Assistant DA Tori Ford Oblon represented our office at the Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals in Austin, joining attorney Rob Daniel (left) and Court of Criminal Appeals Judge David Newell (right). We appreciate her dedication to our criminal justice system.

The Community Board



DA Sorrells was honored at the National Law Enforcement and Corporate Crimes Convention in Arlington, a gathering focused on combating complex financial and corporate crime. His recognition underscored this office's work to strengthen enforcement, deepen coordination with federal and corporate partners, and hold offenders accountable.

Assistant DA Kim D'Avignon was interviewed about the Jason Thornburg case for a series about the making of serial killers. Thornburg was convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death by a Tarrant County jury in December 2024. In September 2021, Thornburg killed David Lueras, 42, Maricruz Mathis, 33, and Lauren Phillips, 34. He cut their bodies into pieces and set them on fire in a dumpster. D'Avignon prosecuted the case with Assistant DA Emily Dixon and now 297th District Judge Amy Allin.

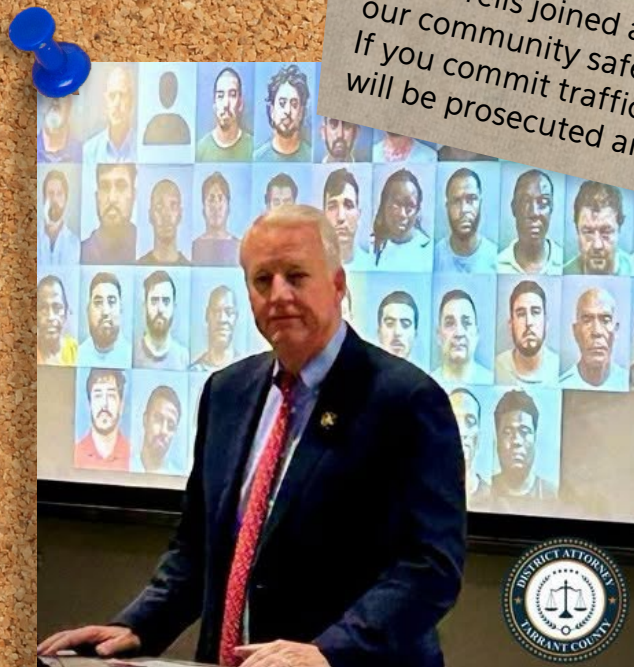


The Community Board

Assistant DA Nathan Martin addressed the growing number of scams targeting our senior citizens when he spoke to a group gathered at the WestAid Food Pantry. WestAid is making a tremendous impact in Fort Worth having served more than 10,000 households in our community. Together, we can help keep our seniors safe from fraud.



DA Sorrells joined a coordinated effort geared to keep our community safe during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. If you commit trafficking crimes in Tarrant County, you will be prosecuted and held accountable.



Recognition



District Attorney Phil Sorrells was included in Fort Worth Inc.'s 500 Most Influential People in Fort Worth list in 2026.

Keeping You Informed

Our office rolled out a new effort this year to make sure crime victims stay updated on what's happening in their cases.

For years, our Victim Services Division had the daunting task of calling victims whenever a court date was added or changed. Starting in July, those updates began being delivered by text message and/or email, giving victims important case updates much quicker. Since implementation, we have sent out approximately 200 notifications per day.

"These text messages are designed to let people know exactly what's happening in their case," District Attorney Phil Sorrells said. "It's a simple tool, but it makes the system more accessible to those who need updates most."

This change is to comply with a new Texas law that requires automated alerts to inform eligible crime victims about court events regarding their offenders.



Victim Services

Stay Informed:

New Text Message Notifications

Our office is committed to supporting victims, and we are launching a new text messaging system to improve communication and case updates.

We ask that you keep us updated if there are any contact information changes. *(Email address or phone number)*

817 884-2740
TCVictimServices@tarrantcountytx.gov

Citizen Prosecutor Academy



If you've ever wanted a behind the scenes look at how the criminal justice system works in Tarrant County, check out our Citizen Prosecutor Academy.

We offer it twice a year.

Our Fall class is already underway, but you can submit your application for the Spring session.

Participants get an inside look at every stage of the prosecution process and see how the system works day to day. Assistant District Attorneys and Investigators teach the classes, answer questions, and walk people through real cases. You even get a chance to tour the Tarrant County Corrections Center.

Classes meet on Thursdays from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and there's no cost to attend. The Spring CPA, which is open to Tarrant County residents, will run from March 4 to May 13 in 2027. Apply now to be part of this unique educational experience.

For more information about the program, call 817-884-1400 or visit cda.tarrantcountytx.gov and click on the Community tab.

Online Application

You can apply online.



Editorial

Written and compiled by
DA Communications Officer Anna Tinsley Williams.
To contact her, send an email to atwilliams@tarrantcountytx.gov.

Editorial assistance by Assistant DA Anne Grady.

Designed by Tarrant County Graphics Assistant Dakota Wyatt.