

# VOICES *of* COUNTY GOVERNMENT



In all 254 counties, county government is a full-time job. Texas county government officials dedicate their careers and lives to public service and are the foremost experts on the challenges their neighbors face each day. County government officials are as diverse as the Texans who elect them, coming from every background imaginable. But as a group, they have one thing in common: from El Paso to Newton and from Dallam to Cameron, county officials are dedicated and committed to keeping Texas strong. Here, county officials talk about their passion for public service.

## Is there anything else you'd like to add or talk about regarding your role as an elected official, your office or your county?

When describing the location of Dumas, the county seat, everyone always says, "That's where we turn left when we go snow skiing." ★

### **SERGIO DELEON** TARRANT COUNTY JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

## You're currently a Tarrant County justice of the peace, but the first office you ran for was constable. What got you interested and why did you choose to run? What brought you to your current office, and how do the two offices compare?

I have passion for public service and deep sense of community and believed that if I disagreed with something then I should serve as the change agent that brings about positive results in my neighborhood.

So I decided to run for a couple of reasons. One, I have always had an interest in law enforcement and public service and the Office of Constable was a position where I could serve the community in a law enforcement capacity. Two, I felt the Office of Constable was being under-served and there were many needs in the Precinct 5 community that the office could address, but were not.

When I was sworn into office all of that changed. I am pleased to say that my vision of creating a professional law enforcement agency that served both the courts and community became a working reality. High crime, truancy and illegal dumping plagued the inner city of Fort Worth and there was disconnect between the office and the citizens of our precinct. Therefore, as constable, I quickly marked our constable cruisers and placed deputy constables in uniforms which increased law enforcement visibility and served as a deterrent to crime as deputy constables went about the business of serving civil process in the precinct.

Additionally, I forged relationships with schools and volunteered security at school carnivals, which was welcomed by parents and teachers. We initiated Truant Round-Ups to keep kids in school, which was appreciated by homeowners and businesses. Moreover, our office was awarded a \$75,000 grant from the North Texas Central Council of Governments to wage a bilingual illegal dumping prevention campaign in Tarrant County. It was hugely successful and I am glad we played a small role in keeping our local environment clean.

Finally, we established a partnership with neighborhood associations and began conducting regular neighborhood patrols and working alongside Citizen on Patrol members at community events, which went a long way to establishing a much needed rapport with residents and the Office of Precinct 5 Constable.

In 2012, then-Justice of the Peace Manuel T. Valdez decided to run for Congress and it was then that I opted to seek the office of Justice of the Peace. To me, life is about new challenges and opportunities and I strongly felt that I could make a difference in the justice court.

The two offices compare in the sense that you serve the same constituency and are working together to bring about justice to litigants who have opted to utilize the people's court. When citizens file legal action and the court renders a decision, it is up to the constable to serve as the enforcement arm of the justice court. Both offices are needed to accomplish the due process of law.



As constable, you can help a lot of people at one time by conducting a neighborhood patrol or serving in a security role at a school, but as judge, you can help one person or, in some cases, entire families. You have the luxury to talk through their case and find a resolution to their issue or concern. My role is to make sure due process of law is followed and that no one is taken advantage of in court.

## How is communicating clearly with your constituents different as a Justice of the Peace than it was as a Constable?

I make it a point to attend neighborhood association and PTA meetings regularly in my precinct. I find that visiting with groups and individuals one-on-one is vital to maintaining a strong rapport with community members. There is no difference in how I have been communicating as constable versus judge, but the change is what information I am now disseminating. As constable, I would announce a neighborhood patrol or receive feedback on a suspicious person or house that needed to be looked into, but as judge I am now communicating the new justice court rules and plans for an upcoming justice center in our precinct.

Additionally, I hold a joint town hall meeting with our constable and citizens of precinct 5 to update the constituency on matters related to our respective offices.

## What has been biggest challenge you've dealt with as an elected official and what advice would you give your peers across the state who may face a similar challenge?

As constable, I was very pro-active and tackled many problem areas in our precinct, however; the commissioners court of my county was apprehensive about embracing my ideas and fully supporting them. They held the opinion constables should serve civil process and do nothing else. Therefore, the burden was on me to communicate my ideas clearly and let them know state law provided for constables to do much more and with greater latitude, we could be a tremendous resource for Tarrant County. We reached common ground on certain ideas and proceeded forward. The commissioners court was always reasonable and willing to meet me in the middle.

Afterwards, we received positive results from community members with regard to our new programs and in some cases the local media publicized our efforts. Positive publicity made it easier to gain approval the next time around. ★