

The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - Tarrant County District Attorney

Spring 2024



A Message from DA Phil Sorrells



It's a new year.

Coming off great successes in 2023, I'm once again looking forward to seeing what my office and I can accomplish.

I remain committed to the same goals I had last year – ensuring justice for all, shrinking the caseload that grew under Covid restrictions, and making sure this office is fully staffed.

If you haven't seen it yet, you should read our 2023 Annual Report that details many of our accomplishments last year.

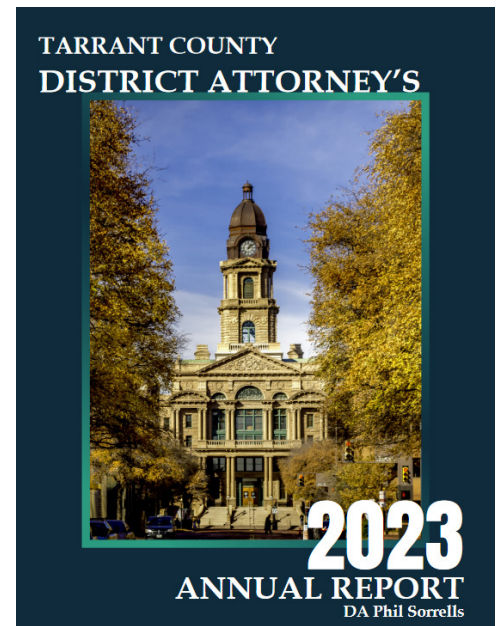
As the Report shows, we take tough cases to trial and, as a result, 22 defendants were sentenced to life in prison last year.

We disposed of more than 52,000 cases and prosecuted 250 jury trials.

Read all about our office's efforts to shut down a strip club and create a Narcotics Unit. You also can read about the increase in electronic evidence, the importance of jury duty, and more.

If you would like to read a copy of our 2023 Annual Report, please visit our website at cda.tarrantcountytx.gov and click on Publications.

Enjoy!

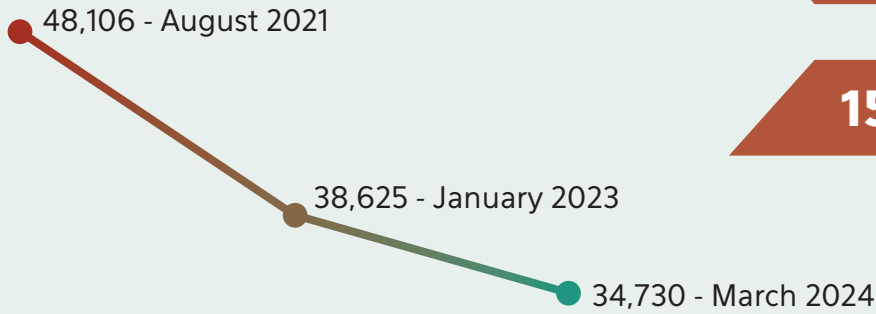


Highlights from the DA's Office

By The Numbers

When DA Sorrells took office more than a year ago, one of his top goals was to reduce the caseload that swelled in the criminal courts under Covid restrictions. Here's how that effort is going:

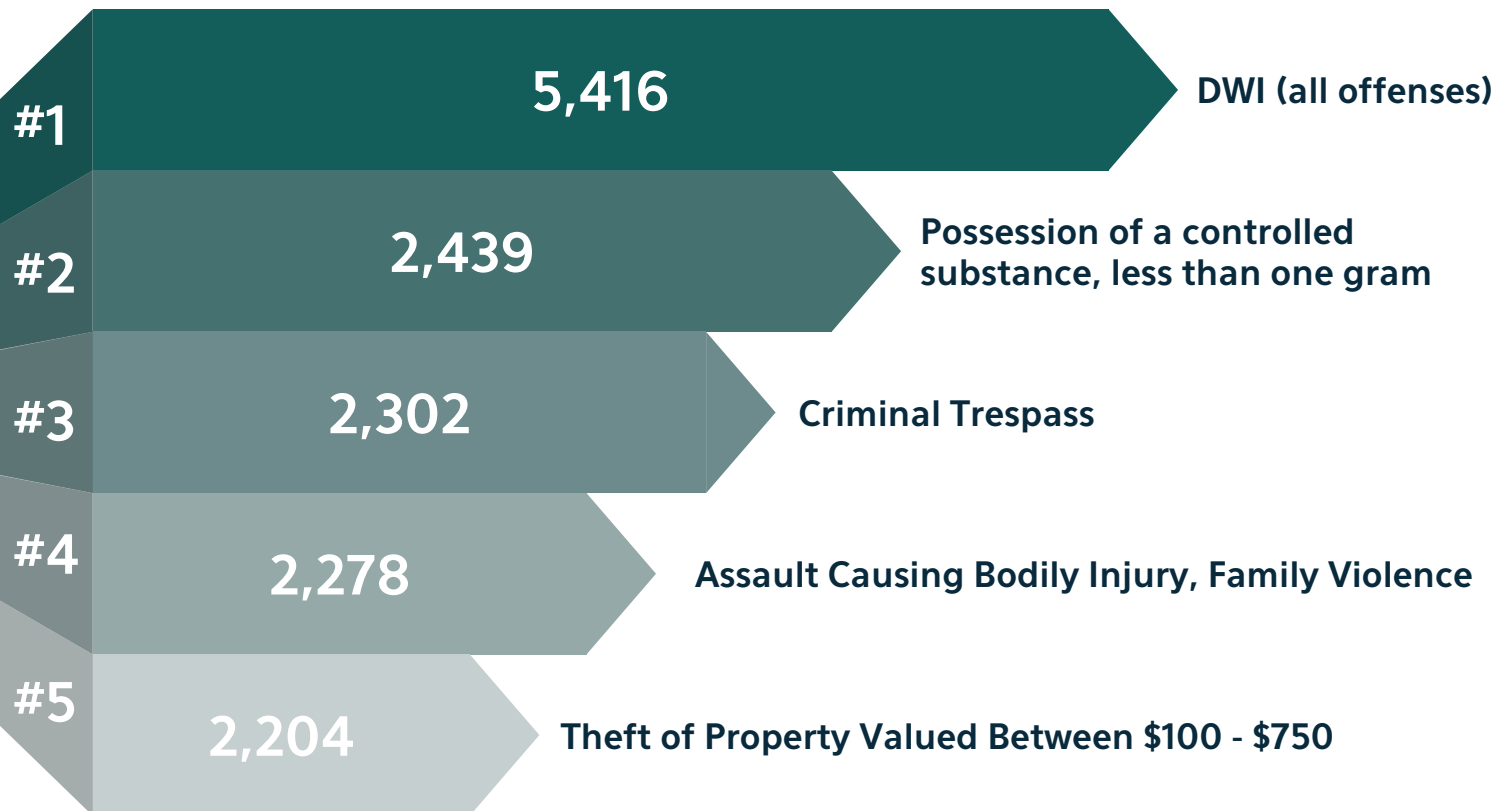
Pending Cases



212 Murder & Capital Murder Cases Resolved in 2023

15 Homicide Cases Resolved this year by March 1, 2024

Top 5 Crimes in 2023



'I don't want it!'

The chilling 9-1-1 call was played in the courtroom.

You could hear crying and screaming and a female saying, "I don't want it!"

That's how the sentencing hearing started in January for a 17-year-old Fort Worth girl who two years before had a baby at her parent's home – and murdered it.

The teenager admitted she killed her baby and asked a jury to determine her sentence.

The jury sentenced her to 15 years behind bars.

Evidence presented by Assistant DAs Lee Sorrells and Kyle Morris showed that the teen delivered a baby girl September 9, 2021, in the bathroom at her family's Fort Worth home. Her sister – shocked that the teen was pregnant – called 9-1-1. The new mother and her baby were taken to the hospital by paramedics.

By then, the baby she named Dayana had a skull fracture and was hemorrhaging. The evidence showed she lived about six hours before she was pronounced dead.

A review of the girl's cell phone revealed chat messages for multiple months between her and the baby's father stating that neither wanted the baby. So, they discussed ways to get rid of the baby. Among options mentioned: the girl said she could wrap the baby in a towel and hit it.

"I'ma kill this baby," the girl wrote.

She was sent to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department. 323 District Judge Kim will determine before her 19th birthday next year whether she should go to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to serve the rest of her sentence.



Emergency Response



Whoever said “not all heroes wear capes” was correct.

During a recent trial, two children were waiting in our victim assistance area. Their parents would be back soon, but they had asked their 14-year-old to watch their 1-year-old while they were in court.

Cecilia “Cece” Jones, one of our victim assistant coordinators, walked into the room and saw that the 1-year-old was getting very upset. She was crying and stuffing powdered doughnuts into her mouth.

Suddenly, the little girl started to choke.

“She was gagging and had a scared look on her face,” Jones said. “I first held out my hand to her mouth to catch what she started to spit up. I then picked her up and began patting her

on the back because she was still gagging.”

“More pieces came out,” Jones said. “She then put her hands in her mouth, so I looked in there and took two fingers to remove the remaining big piece.”

The little girl finally was able to catch her breath and swallow the doughnut pieces that remained in her mouth and throat.

Jones gave her some water and the girl’s brother comforted her and helped her calm down. Jones then cut the remaining doughnuts into small pieces and told the 14-year-old to break any further snacks down into bite-size pieces.

The little girl’s mother soon returned.

We are grateful the little girl recovered. We want to make sure more staffers can handle similar situations that might arise. As a result of this incident, everyone in the Victim Services department this year is participating in CPR/AED training.



Moving Forward

DA Sorrells has made the prosecution of narcotics cases, including those involving fentanyl, a priority for this office.

Last year, he created a Narcotics Unit. By mid-December, a Tarrant County Grand Jury returned the first indictment under a new Texas law that lets people be charged with murder if they supply or distribute fentanyl and it leads to a death.

A second person was indicted in a different case in February.

Sorrells recently shared his insights about this continuing focus during an interview with a national TV news crew. Among the highlights:

- ➔ Youths can get illegal pills, perhaps of Adderall or Ritalin, for as little as \$2.
- ➔ Pills can be bought from people you meet on social media – and delivered to your home.
- ➔ Some people specifically buy fentanyl pills. Others buy pills that they don't know have come in contact with fentanyl.



All of these pills can be deadly.

"We don't have chemists mixing these up. We have drug lords doing it," Sorrells said. "You are really taking your chances when you put this in your body."

"These drugs are poisoning our kids," he said. "If you are out there dealing this poison, we are going to come after you."

Save the Date

Mark your calendar for April 22, 2024.

That's the day, during National Crime Victims' Rights Week, that our office honors victims' rights.

A 9:00 a.m. event sponsored by victim service professionals in Tarrant County will take place at the Tom Vandergriff Civil Courts building, 100 N. Calhoun Street, in downtown Fort Worth. Everyone is invited.

This year's theme is: How would you help? Options, services, and hope for crime survivors.

Tarrant County has teams of victim service professionals who work hard to ensure that victims understand and are afforded their rights.

"We are the voice for crime victims," DA Sorrells said. "We help them through some of the hardest days of their lives."

The Tarrant County District Attorney's Office is committed to protecting victims, honoring their rights, and being a voice for all crime victims.

NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMS' RIGHTS WEEK

April 21-27, 2024

**HOW WOULD
YOU HELP?**

**Options, services and hope
for crime survivors.**

Serial Rapist

As he stood in a Collin County courtroom, Jeffery Lemor Wheat said one word four times – guilty.

With that word, the 51-year-old ended investigations into four home invasion sexual assaults in North Texas between 2003 and 2011, including one in Arlington.

On February 27, during a multi-county disposition, Wheat was sentenced to life in prison.

“We are exceptionally grateful for the hard work of all the agencies that came together to secure justice for these women,” Assistant DA Stephanie Simpson said. “Their hard work also ensures the safety of all women in our community moving forward.”



The first case was a September 2003 sexual assault case in Arlington, where the victim was in her home when a man broke in during the middle of the night and sexually assaulted her. He was nude except for socks on his hands and feet and a white shirt over his face.

At the time, there were limitations in technology and testing, which led to the case being suspended.

Years later, evidence taken from the Arlington home was retested and cutting-edge DNA testing methods linked this case to sexual assaults that occurred in Plano, Coppell, and Shady Shores between 2010 and 2011. These three victims were all members of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

In 2021, Wheat was found in Crawford County, Arkansas, and arrested. More DNA tests linked him to the Arlington case and to the three other cases.

The DNA testing that helped bring Wheat to justice is called Forensic Genetic Genealogy, or FGG. This testing also brought Glen McCurley, the man who killed 17-year-old Carla Walker in 1974, to justice in 2020.

DA Investigator Chris LaChance and Victim Coordinator Laura Medina also worked on the case.

Life Sentences

When DA Sorrells took office last year, he pledged to be tough on crime. He lives up to that promise every day.

In the first months of 2024, four people in addition to Jeffery Wheat were sentenced to life in prison by Tarrant County juries.

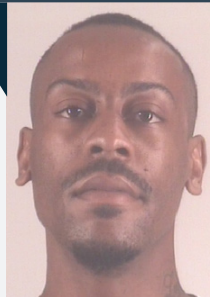
Here are those cases:

Jose Valle-Fernandez, 74



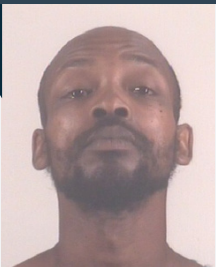
Fernandez was found guilty of continuous sexual assault of a child under the age of 14. Over the course of five years, Fernandez sexually abused four of his grandchildren, who were between the ages of 5 and 9. Prosecutors Courtney Mowdy, Juan Sandoval. Investigator Tiffany Johnson. Victim Coordinator Imelda Lopez.

Maurice Kelso Smith, 32



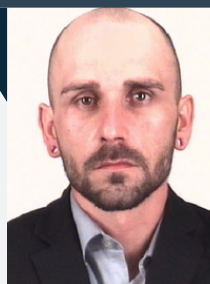
Smith was found guilty of capital murder for killing Darionne Burley, his girlfriend who was pregnant with twins. On June 29, 2020, he shot Burley in the back of the head, causing her immediate death and the deaths of the babies. Smith drove to Mansfield where he robbed a woman at gunpoint of her vehicle. He left his car at the scene of the robbery, where police discovered Burley in a bloody crime scene. Prosecutors Allenna Bangs, Kate Hinojosa. Investigator Caleb Blank. Victim Coordinator Clara Salvatierra.

Ronnie Jackson, 41



Jackson was found guilty of aggravated assault of a peace officer with a deadly weapon in a 2020 attack against a Fort Worth police officer. On June 13, 2020, he was evading police in a stolen vehicle on Interstate 820. As he neared the Camp Bowie West Boulevard exit, an officer stood on the side of the road, throwing out spike strips to slow him down. Jackson drove toward the officer, hitting him, and then running over him. He fled the scene. The officer was taken to the hospital and underwent immediate surgery for extensive, life-threatening injuries. Prosecutors Lisa Callaghan, D.J. Estes. Investigator Ben Lopez. Victim Coordinator Laura Medina.

Nathan Greer, 32



Greer was found guilty of continuous sexual abuse of a child under the age of 14. He sexually abused his girlfriend's daughter for several years, starting when she was 5 years old. Prosecutors Steven Elliott, Ashton Moore. Investigator Kevin Hilliard. Victim Coordinator Carma Anderson.

In Our Community

DA Sorrells and his prosecutors continue reaching out to community groups throughout Tarrant County, explaining the work this office does as well as sharing information about specific cases or divisions here. Here's a look at some of the recent community outreach done by DA staff.



Assistant DA Nathan Martin told the Carswell Retired Officers Wives Club that seniors are the most targeted demographic for financial fraud. He then provided key information to help seniors protect themselves.

Assistant DA Kim D'Avignon updated community members at the Tarrant County Sexual Abuse Advisory Council about strides made during Sorrells' first year as DA. She emphasized work on sexual assault cases.



Assistant DA Glynis McGinty explained our office's Election Integrity Unit to many community groups. She shared how cases are reviewed and vowed this office will aggressively prosecute election violations.



In Our Community



Jalayne Robinson, Texas District & County Attorneys Association's Director of Victim Services, spoke to more than a dozen victim service professionals about new Texas laws and how to boost their ability to help victims. First Assistant District Attorney Robb Catalano posed for a photo with the group.

Felony prosecutors attended the "Let's Play Bingo" Ladies Luncheon fundraiser for Alliance for Children. The Alliance for Children is a vital partner of our office.



Recognition

Congratulations to William Knight for winning the Republican primary for Criminal District Court No. 2.

Knight, a Fort Worth native, is a prosecutor who has worked at the DA's Office since 2015. Before then, he served as a staff attorney at the Texas Department of Public Safety.

During his time here, he has worked in several units, including those addressing Intimate Partner Violence and Special Victims. Currently Knight, 38, works in Criminal District Court 3.

He is board certified in criminal law.



Assistant DA Tori Ford Oblon in January gained board certification in criminal appellate law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. Less than 7% of attorneys in Texas are board certified.

Assistant DA Tori Ford Oblon



Assistant DA Paul Nguyen was appointed to serve as the chair of the Dallas Asian American Bar Association Mentorship Committee for 2024.

Assistant DA Paul Nguyen



Editorial

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