



Summer 2021

The Docket



Sharen Wilson – Criminal District Attorney

For decades, it has been the same story for the criminal-justice-involved mentally ill in Tarrant County.

Caught breaking the law, frequently criminal trespassing, they are taken to jail. There, they enter a costly criminal justice system and wait for the medical help they need.

Then it happens again and again. That story is about to be re-written.

Tarrant County Commissioners all support a long-talked about plan to create a Mental Health Jail Diversion Center (MHJDC) to provide an alternative to locking up people with mental health needs. This Center will be supported by a partnership that includes John Peter Smith Hospital, MHMR, Tarrant County, law enforcement and the Criminal District Attorney's Office.

Here's how it will work. A police officer stops someone for a low-level, non-violent crime such as criminal trespassing. Based on his expertise and training, the officer recognizes that the person is mentally ill. After all, more than 60% of people arrested for criminal trespassing already are on the MHMR database as receiving treatment.

Instead of arresting the person and heading to jail, the officer instead takes that person to the Mental Health Jail Diversion Center. The only way into this facility is in custody of the police. There, that person can stay voluntarily – in a welcoming environment – while MHMR, JPS, and community partners work to find the best options to help with psychiatric needs, homelessness, medication management, health issues and more.

And it's not only a "win" for the mentally ill.

Police officers will save time by dropping off people at the MHJDC, rather than writing up a police report and checking them in to jail. The County will save your tax dollars by not putting the mentally ill behind bars where they would rack up jail, attorney and court costs.

I am grateful to Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley and Commissioners Roy Brooks, Devan Allen, Gary Fickes and J.D. Johnson, who are dedicated to making this center a reality. Judge Whitley says he wants it to open before the end of this year.

It is time. This is the right thing to do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sharen Wilson".



Expunctions

A record number of Tarrant residents are trying to clean up their criminal records.

More than 700 people this year applied for expunctions, which is the legal process to remove arrests or charges from a person's criminal record, during the

5th Annual Expunction and Nondisclosure Clinic.

This clinic "is critical to our citizens regaining their ability to participate in the American dream, and become a valued member of society," said Tarrant County Commissioner Roy Brooks, a longtime advocate for the clinic who worked for years to reduce the filing fees for expunctions. "One should not have

to continue to pay for a crime for the rest of their lives.”

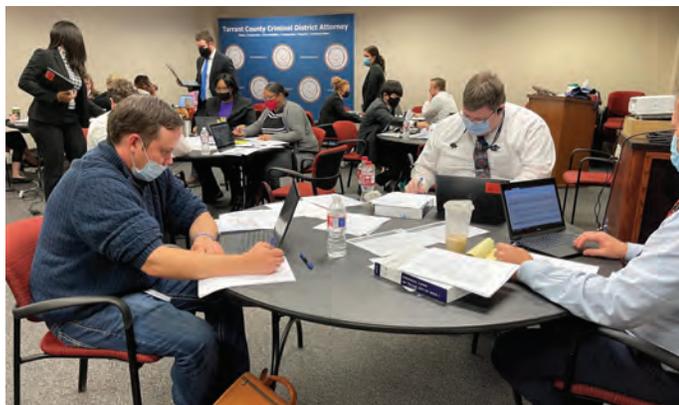
“This clinic gives our citizens their lives back and restores to them one of the bedrocks of our democracy, which is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” he said. “I’m proud to have been a part of this important and meaningful work.”

2021 was the first year the clinic was held virtually (because of the lingering pandemic).

This year, 763 applications were received, compared with 99 in 2019. The 2020 clinic was cancelled because of the pandemic.

In 2019, 67 expunction and nondisclosure applications were approved. So far this year, 190 expunctions and 165 nondisclosures have been approved, but about one-third of the applications are still being processed.

Since 2016, this office has teamed with the L. Clifford Davis Legal Association and Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas to host these clinics. Brooks and his office have been involved as well.



Expunction Clinic, April 19, 2021

More than 5,300 expunctions and 600 nondisclosures have been issued since then.

“It is important to give people – especially those who had their charges dropped or completed a diversion program – a second chance,” Sharen Wilson said.

“Having a criminal record can prevent someone from getting a job or a place to live. Erasing that record gives people a fresh start and helps them, once again, to positively contribute to society.”

End of watch

A permanent memorial for fallen Tarrant County law enforcement officers who died in the line of duty now lies on the west lawn of the historic Tarrant County courthouse.



The formal dedication ceremony for the Tarrant County Law Enforcement Memorial – a slab of pink granite that encases a ring-shaped memorial featuring a Texas star and a bronze Tarrant County seal – was held in May. Engraved on the granite are the names of each of the 16 Tarrant law enforcement officials killed in the line of duty and the date of their death.



“It is vital that we always remember and honor those in law enforcement who gave their lives to protect our Tarrant County residents,” Sharen Wilson said. “Their families, friends, coworkers and loved ones will never forget them. Neither will we.”

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Wilson, along with Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, County Commissioner J.D. Johnson and Sheriff Bill Waybourn serve on the Law Enforcement Memorial Committee, which has worked for years to make this tribute a reality.



Commissioner Johnson personally worked on this effort for more than 30 years. "It's been a long time coming," he said. "I'm certainly glad to see it finally being complete. A lot of people have worked on this and I'm very grateful to those that have."

Donations were collected to pay for this memorial, which ended up costing about \$180,000.

The first Tarrant law enforcement officer to die in the line of duty was Sheriff John B. York, who was killed August 1861.



"Tarrant County has always had a special place in its heart for those who protect us and keep us safe," Judge Whitley said. "This memorial not only honors those individuals who have made the ultimate sacrifice for Tarrant County, but it gives them and their families a place to be remembered."

Working dogs

Brady and Scout – this office's official emotional support dog and his furry friend who is often referred to as Brady's own comfort canine – have joined an elite club.

They are the latest canines to be showcased in the 360 West Magazine's "Working Dogs" monthly feature.

360WEST
A full circle view of life on the western half of DFW

May 2021

Comfort Canines



Brady, on the floor, and Scout provide a much needed service, plus they're good companions to the human employees of the Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney's Office.

By Shela Kevlar
You know it's a tough job when an emotional support dog has its own support canine.
But imagine being a child who has either witnessed criminal activity or been a victim and then had to deal with talking to lawyers and judges. Imagine having to take the witness stand by yourself in a courtroom.
Brady, a 6-year-old golden retriever, helps those kids get through a tough time. That's why he is one of the most popular employees in the Tarrant County

Brady and Scout are furry friends to those children dealing with the criminal justice system. They also keep each other company at work.

Criminal District Attorney's Office in Fort Worth.
CDA Sharen Wilson, who has been in office since 2015, is a dog lover who has two of her own at home. Knowing the value of canine companionship during stressful times, Wilson brought Brady into the office five years ago (he lives with two of the staffers in the office). "He's been a game changer for adults and kids," says Wilson.
Found as a stray puppy in a field in Midland, Brady was taken in by Golden Retriever Rescue of North Texas. He's had professional training and is the perfect dog at work. With a vest and his own badge to identify him as a working dog, he pretty much has free range of the building. Everyone seems to know him, and the feeling is mutual.
But Brady really comes to life

Brady hasn't been able to do his regular job of comforting children, along with adult victims and witnesses, as much as normal since the COVID-19 pandemic led to the shutdown of jury trials last year.

But now, as more people return to the courthouse, there's a growing number of victims and visitors for Brady to help.

The magazine article notes that both dogs love all the humans in this office – and interacting with those who come to visit.

"The only people they're not fond of are the window washers," Sharen Wilson, with a wry smile, told the 360 West interviewer.

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Making a difference

Victim Impact Statements make a difference.

They give victims, or their families, a chance to describe how the crime they suffered impacted them mentally, physically and financially. That helps judges decide in some cases what type of sentence to give the accused – and it helps prison officials decide whether to give an inmate parole.

The state of Texas is looking at revising the Victim Impact Statement (VIS) forms used across the state. Some professionals who work with victims have been asked to help, including Allison Bowen, director of the CDA's Victim Services team.



Allison Bowen and the Victim Services Team

Bowen and others across the state will serve on a 2021 Victim Impact Statement Revision Committee, which will review the format of the statement as well as related legislation, processing procedures, the Victim Impact Statement Quarterly Activity Report and more.

"It is an honor to be a part of this committee," Bowen said. "The VIS is used throughout the criminal justice process and should be considered by the prosecutor, the judge and board of pardons and parole before certain agreements or decisions concerning an offender's release to parole supervision are made.

"Being a part of the committee means victims of Tarrant County will have their voices heard to impact change throughout the criminal justice system."

Committee members will meet at least three times.

"Our goal is to make these documents user friendly for victims as well as for criminal justice professionals," said Angie McCown, director of the Victim Services Division at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. "We value (committee members') ... dedication to making a difference in the lives of victims."

Updated VIS documents should be available on the TDCJ Victim Services Division website by the end of 2021. That website is www.tdcj.texas.gov/divisions/vs/index.html.

A learning process

Our Spring Citizen Prosecutor Academy (CPA) this year has officially wrapped up.

Classes for 12 weeks touched on topics ranging from how the Grand Jury works to how certain teams – such as the Special Victims Unit and Elder Financial Fraud – operate. Each class is led by our attorneys or investigators who explain how their team works.



"I signed up for CPA without much idea of what to expect," said Susan Stewart, another recent CPA graduate. "I walked away with more insight and knowledge about the DA's office, duties and procedures than I could have imagined."

If you missed signing up for the Spring CPA, make sure you sign up for the fall program that will run from September 2 to November 18. Classes are held Thursday nights.

To learn about the program, go to our website, cda.tarrantcounty.com, or email Amy Bearden, our community outreach coordinator, at AHBearden@tarrantcountytx.gov.

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Congratulations



Congratulations to Marvinna Robinson, an ACDA who heads the Mental Health and Protective Orders team. She has been elected to serve on the 2021-22 Board of Directors for the Tarrant County Bar Association. She is the Place 2 Director.

The association is made up of more than 2,600 attorneys, judges, law students and other legal professionals.



Congratulations to Angel Williams, an ACDA who has been appointed vice chair of the State Bar of Texas Law Focused Education Committee.

This committee works to develop and implement programs to educate the public about legal rights and the roles the legal

profession and judiciary play in protecting those rights and enforcing responsibilities. The committee also supports the programs of Law Focused Education, Inc.

Crime victims

This office recently sent a message to crime victims.

The message, delivered during National Crime Victims' Rights Week in April: Victims advocates are here to help guide the way through the criminal justice system.

We gave hundreds of blue silicone bracelets, all emblazoned with the phrase "Every Step Of the Way," to CDA employees, county officials, victims advocates and police officers. We asked them to take pictures of themselves wearing the bracelets and send them to us.

Here's a look at some of the pictures we received.



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