

# The DOCKET

Phil Sorrells - Criminal District Attorney



Spring 2023



## Phil Sorrells Takes The Oath

### **New Leadership Team**

Robb Catalano, Rose Anna Salinas,  
Craig Price and Jason Peters

### **Getting to Trial**

Clearing the backlog of cases  
left behind by Covid shutdowns

### **Major Case Sentences**

Life sentences and justice for a  
detective killed by a drunk driver



## Message from CDA Phil Sorrells

After my time on the bench, it was great to be back in the District Attorney's Office.

The office looks different now – new attorneys, new staff, new offices, new carpet. But the mission is the same: seeking justice in Tarrant County.

In an effort to shore up the largest law firm in Tarrant County, I have made some changes. I brought in a new leadership team, convinced some former prosecutors to return, and worked to fill dozens of vacant positions in this office.

My goal is clear.

I want to make sure that every victim – and defendant – finds justice in a timely manner. To make that happen, I'm working to reduce the backlog of cases clogging the court system and the jail alike.

Here's a quick look at the numbers:

- On January 1, our office had 38,625 pending cases. By March 1, that number was down to 37,571 – the fewest number of pending cases our office has had since August 2020, when the backlog grew because Covid 19 restrictions shut down the courts.
- Between January 1 and March 1, 8,787 adult criminal cases were submitted to our office. In that same time frame, our office disposed of 9,520 adult criminal cases.
- As for the worst of the worst, there were 482 pending murder or capital murder cases in our office on January 1, 2023. As of March 31, we resolved 59 of these homicide cases.

We are constantly working to reduce the case backlog and send criminals to prison. We are making progress, but our work is far from finished.

We are just getting started.



# Taking the Oath



It is a new era in the Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney's Office.

On January 2, longtime Judge Phil Sorrells stood on the steps of the historic Tarrant County Courthouse, taking the oath of office, and vowing to carry out the duties required of the Criminal District Attorney.

In front of his family, friends – and hundreds of CDA attorneys and staff – he promised to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution and the laws of Texas and the United States.

"Justice must be served, both for the victims and for those accused of perpetrating illegal behavior or acts," he told the crowd that day. "We are the agents of justice."

Priorities since taking the oath include reducing the backlog of cases, fully staffing this office, ensuring bail amounts are sufficient, and seeking justice for all.

"We are committed to doing our part in keeping our community safe," Sorrells said, adding that everyone in the CDA's office will work to fairly enforce the laws.

Sorrells – who served as a judge for 25 years before being elected DA – created an executive leadership team to help with that effort: First

Assistant Robb Catalano, Chief of the Criminal Division Rose Anna Salinas, Chief of the Civil Division Craig Price, Chief of Staff Jason Peters, Chief of Investigators Maria Hinojosa, and Chief of the Misdemeanor Division Bruce Beasley.

Also part of the leadership team are the Deputy Chiefs of the Criminal Division: Robert Huseman, Dale Smith, and Allenna Bangs. These distinguished attorneys help guide more than 100 fellow prosecutors, who are all working hard to ensure justice for victims in Tarrant County.



Sorrells and his leadership team have been hard at work, shifting resources to where they are most needed, recruiting experienced attorneys to the office, focusing on reducing the trial caseload, and enforcing the laws.



They aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

In fact, members of the executive leadership team – and Sorrells himself – often were seen moving furniture and boxes to help attorneys settle into their offices. Some pitched in to handle dockets in various courts; others accumulated a hefty trial caseload. They all are committed to doing whatever needs to be done.

"We will fulfill our sacred duty, and we will seek justice," Sorrells said.



## Executive Team

After taking the oath of office, CDA Phil Sorrells designated an executive team.

Robb Catalano, First Assistant Criminal District Attorney. He provides overall management of the office and assists with strategic planning. Catalano, a former Tarrant County and federal prosecutor, served as judge of Criminal District Court No. 3 since 2011.



Jason Peters, Chief of Staff. He oversees non-attorney, non-investigator staff and business operations, hiring and personnel matters, facility requirements, communications, community outreach and more. Peters has served the county for more than 26 years in various roles.

Rose Anna Salinas, Chief of the Criminal Division. She manages the largest division in the office. Salinas, who worked as a prosecutor in Tarrant County from 1989-1998, supervises and guides attorneys as they investigate and prosecute criminal cases in Tarrant County. She spent more than 20 years as a defense attorney and is a former president

and board member of the Tarrant County Criminal Defense Lawyers Association.

Bruce Beasley, Chief of the Misdemeanor Division, guides dozens of attorneys prosecuting misdemeanor cases in Tarrant County. He is an award-winning attorney who represented clients on a variety of legal matters for nearly three decades. A prosecutor for this office from 1992-1994, Beasley was recognized as a Top Attorney by Fort Worth Magazine from 2012 to 2022.

Craig Price, Chief of the Civil Division. He is the general counsel for Tarrant County. His division represents Tarrant County and its elected or appointed officials in civil litigation. The Civil Division also handles open records requests, helps victims of family violence with mental health and protective orders, and represents the Department of Family and Protective Services in cases where abuse or neglect are alleged. Price served seven years in the civil division at the Grayson County CDA's Office and before that practiced civil litigation and criminal defense in Denton and Tarrant counties for more than 25 years.

Maria Hinojosa, Chief Investigator. This division is comprised of certified Texas Peace Officers who assist prosecutors in evaluating and preparing cases for trial. While reviewing cases, investigators determine areas that need more investigation, track down witnesses, and gather information to help prosecutors with the cases. As an 11-year veteran of this office, Hinojosa was promoted to Chief Investigator in August 2021.



# National Crime Victims' Rights Week

April 23-29, 2023



Office for Victims of Crime  
**OVC**

National Crime Victims' Rights Week is April 23-29. This week is designated to promote awareness about crime victim rights and honor survivors.

Our office is working with Tarrant County leaders and victim service professionals at local law enforcement agencies to host events at subcourthouses throughout Tarrant County in April. This event is a tribute to the laws that support victims and a promise that victims' voices will be heard in Tarrant County.

Events will be at these locations at 10:30 a.m. Monday, April 24, 2023:

- Tarrant County Administration Building, 100 East Weatherford Street, Fort Worth
- Precinct 1 Southwest Sub-Courthouse, 6551 Granbury Road, Fort Worth
- Precinct 2 Sub-Courthouse, 700 East Abram Street, Arlington
- Precinct 3 Northeast Sub-Courthouse, 645 Grapevine Highway, Hurst
- Precinct 4 Northwest Sub-Courthouse 6713 Telephone Road, Lake Worth

This week has been recognized since 1981, providing a way for law enforcement to renew its commitment to crime victims every year.

For more information about victim services in our office, go online to [cda.tarrantcounty.com](http://cda.tarrantcounty.com) and click the Services and Information button. For more information about National Crime Victims' Rights Week, visit [ovc.ojp.gov](http://ovc.ojp.gov).



# Reaching Out

CDA Phil Sorrells has been busy making his way around Tarrant County, meeting people ranging from those gathered at Commissioners Court meetings to elected officials and law enforcement officers.



Sorrells is reaching out to community members to discuss how to keep the community safe. Every day he makes decisions and gives guidance to further the goal of community safety.

He recently met two special groups of Fort Worth police officers – those who work with the Mounted Patrol and the K9 unit.



Continued on next page





Sorrells learned that horses in the Mounted Patrol are all geldings that patrol downtown Fort Worth and the Stockyards, in addition to visiting children at schools. Interesting facts: there are 14 horses at the facility, mostly older, mature horses; the horses eat square bales of hay because they would gorge themselves if they ate round bales; and there's a former racehorse, Cooper, in the patrol.

During their patrols, these officers and their horses interact with the public and develop fellowship within the community.

At the K9 Unit, which he saw in the Tactical Village at the Bob Bolen Public Safety Complex, Sorrells met several of the narcotic sniffing dogs and watched as Duke, a 6-year-old, 67-pound German Shorthaired Pointer, ran through training exercises. He learned that the K9s live with their handlers. It could cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 to train each dog.

Fort Worth Police Sergeant Charles Hubbard said this of the dogs: "They are in great health, they are well taken care of, and they are happy. They have a great life."



# WARNING

As populations age, and Elder Financial Fraud becomes more prevalent locally and across the country, it will not be tolerated in Tarrant County.

That's the message Phil Sorrells hopes people received from a recent sentencing in Tarrant County.



Ifeanyichukwu Festus Obi is the 43-year-old ringleader in the "Yahoo Boys" gang that targeted elderly victims in sweetheart scams and then laundered that money by sending it to Nigeria. Obi recently was sentenced to 20 years in prison for engaging in organized criminal activity and theft of property worth more than \$300,000.

Obi sent \$1.32 million in stolen money to Nigeria during just two months in 2019.

This prosecution was the result of a 17-month investigation by a task force involving the Colleyville Police Department, the United States Secret Service, the United States Postal Inspector, and our office.

"Tarrant County is not the place to bring your criminal enterprises," Sorrells said. "I am grateful for all the agencies involved working together to keep our community safe. Our work is not finished.

"We are still working cases against three other members of the 'Yahoo Boys.'"

During Obi's court hearing, it was revealed that he is connected to callers in Nigeria who scam the elderly into sending money to their online love interest. His sentence reflects the vast amount of money he was laundering overseas.

"These Nigerian scammers are calling our retired-elderly population all through the night,

waking them up, stressing them out and compelling them to send their money far and wide," said Assistant Criminal District Attorney Lori Varnell, who prosecuted this case.

## Life Sentences

In less than a month, three men were sentenced to life in prison for murder in Tarrant County.



Jeffery Cory killed Erik Fernandez, 43, in 2019. He told several different stories, but the facts are that he murdered Fernandez in the home the two shared. Cory, 44, shot Fernandez in the living room, rolled him up in a rug and dragged the rug to Fernandez's bedroom. Cory lived with his roommate's body for days before he finally called the police. On February 9, a Tarrant jury sentenced him to life in prison.



Larry Pedersen murdered someone he spent time with in 2019 at an apartment complex in south Fort Worth. Pedersen, 43, shot two people, killing Austin Tomlinson and injuring Robert Watkins. On February 10th, a Tarrant County jury sentenced him to life in prison for murder and to 90 years in prison for aggravated assault.



Marquis Sypho, 26, was found guilty of murdering Raymond Huerta during a 2018 robbery of a Save A Lot grocery store on James Avenue in Fort Worth. Sypho and another man entered the store to rob the clerks at gunpoint and empty the safe. Huerta, also 26, took dinner to his wife Jackie, who worked at the store. Sypho shot Huerta multiple times, killing him; Sypho then brutally beat Jackie, who ran toward him trying to defend her husband, before emptying the safe. On March 6, a Tarrant jury convicted him of capital murder and sentenced him to prison without the possibility of parole for the rest of his life.





# ‘This is justice’



**Garrett Hull**



A hero.

That’s how Garrett Hull, a Fort Worth police officer murdered while on duty in 2018, has long been described.

Now his family finally has found justice for his death.

Last year, Timothy Huff was sentenced to life in prison without parole for his role in Hull’s murder. In January, Samuel Mayfield pled guilty to Hull’s murder and was sentenced to 60 years in prison.

"With this plea, the family of Officer Garrett Hull can move on knowing they don’t have to relive Garrett’s death," said Tim Rodgers, the Assistant Criminal District Attorney who handled this case along with ACDA Lloyd Whelchel.

"Justice in horrible cases takes many forms and many factors are taken into consideration in deciding what an appropriate plea is.

"Hull’s family supported the plea.

"This is justice," Rodgers said.

Hull was killed September 14, 2018, during a confrontation with a group of armed robbery suspects who had been targeting Hispanic-run bars.

Police had staked out the area where a robbery was planned at the Los Vaqueros bar. After robbing customers inside, three men – Mayfield, Huff and Dacion Steptoe – came out, saw police, and ran in different directions. Hull was among the officers who chased Steptoe. Steptoe shot at the officers who returned fire. Hull was shot in the head and rushed to the hospital, where he was later pronounced dead. Steptoe was shot and killed.

The other two suspects – Mayfield and Huff – were caught and charged with Hull's murder. Texas law allows a person to be criminally responsible for the actions of someone else when there was a conspiracy to commit one crime and another felony occurs.



**Timothy Huff**



**Samuel Mayfield**

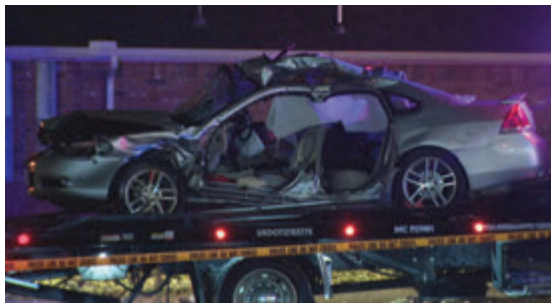


# ‘I lost my best friend’

Priscilla Cervantes watched on a cold day in January as Dylan Molina, the man who killed her husband and injured her and her sons in a 2021 car crash, pled guilty to intoxication manslaughter.

Law enforcement officers from throughout Tarrant County filled the courtroom in support of the late Eules Detective Alejandro “Alex” Cervantes and the Cervantes family.

As part of the plea, Molina was sentenced to 15 years in prison for intoxication manslaughter and 10 years in prison for each intoxication assault charge. All sentences run concurrently.



Cervantes family car



Dylan Molina



Molina trying to flee the crash scene

On November 27, 2021, Molina ran a red light and crashed into a Chevy Impala, killing Detective Cervantes and seriously injuring his wife, Priscilla, and sons Joshua and Jake, at a Lake Worth intersection.



Priscilla Cervantes said her life was turned upside down that day. “I lost my best friend and the love of my life, the person I was supposed to grow old with,” she told Molina in the courtroom.

Not only did Molina rob her of her husband, but he also robbed her sons of their father. She said Alex was a wonderful friend, son, husband, father. “He was and forever will be our hero.”

Now every day is a battle for her.

“I hope every day behind bars is pure agony for you,” Priscilla Cervantes told Molina. “I will never forgive you for as long as I live.”

Just days after Molina was sentenced, the bartender who overserved Molina the night of the accident turned herself in to the Parker County Sheriff’s Office. Cala Richardson is charged with one count of sale to certain persons, a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail if convicted.

## Election Integrity



CDA Phil Sorrells teamed up with Tarrant County Sheriff Bill Waybourn and Tarrant County Judge Tim O'Hare in February to create an Election Integrity Task Force.

The goal of the task force is to boost confidence in local elections by creating this team to investigate and prosecute people committing voter fraud in Tarrant County.

"We want to either prove that there are faults in our elections or prove that there aren't," Sorrells said during a February press conference announcing the task force.

Waybourn and Sorrells said existing staff will investigate complaints and prosecute any resulting criminal cases. Investigators will be trained in both the government and election codes. No new staff will be hired for this effort.

A recent state audit showed that Tarrant County "administers a quality, transparent election." Sorrells said the goal is to make sure local elections stay that way.

"There is no place for voter fraud, harvesting operations, or any violations of our Election Code here in Tarrant County," according to a joint statement from Sorrells, Waybourn and O'Hare. "If you engage in these activities, we will find you and bring you to justice."

Anyone who has an election-related concern can call 817-884-1213 to submit a tip.