Essex County Prosecutor’s Office

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Chief Executives

From Left to Right: Acting Chief of County Detectives Mitchell G. McGuire III; Acting Essex County Prosecutor Theodore N. Stephens II; and Acting First Assistant Prosecutor Romesh C. Sukhdeo.
During 2019, the total number of adult defendant case files reviewed by the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office (ECPO) was 10,859, versus 11,141 in 2018. Also, 4,975 defendants were indicted or charged by accusation in 2019, versus 5,658 in 2018. A total of 46 percent of the ECPO’s total adult defendant resolutions within 2019 following an indictment or accusation involved first or second-degree criminal charges. Further, in 2019, the total number of juveniles referred in delinquency case filings in Essex County was 1,798, versus 1,574 in 2018.

(Statistics from N.J. Division of Criminal Justice, Analysis of Prosecutors’ Data, and from the Promis Gavel Database of the Administrative Office of the Courts, N.J. Superior Court).
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Message from
Acting Essex County Prosecutor
Theodore N. Stephens II

Over the last 12 months the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office has been faithful to its mission to “seek justice, serve justice and to do justice.” For me, that means delivering justice whether it comes in the form of a conviction or the release of someone who has been wrongly accused.

A prosecutor’s job is not simply to seek convictions, it is to follow the facts and the law. At all times, it means keeping victims in the forefront of our decision-making while never forgetting that we also have a duty to the accused. Our commitment to both is to deliver justice fairly, effectively and expeditiously.

We credit our success to the hard work of the men and women of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office – assistant prosecutors, detectives and support staff – who are expected to prosecute cases without fear, favor or prejudice.

We also credit our success to the fact that we work closely with the communities we serve, including clergy, mental health and medical professionals, seniors, youth and many more. We have forged and continue to maintain a robust alliance with our partners in law enforcement at the local, state and federal levels. Policing and prosecuting are not solo endeavors. They require cooperation from everyone.

I invite you to take some time to go through the pages of the 2019 Annual Report to learn more about the work carried out in 2019. There is a lot of good news to report. The Essex County Prosecutor’s Office continues to handle nearly a third of the felonies statewide.

Together we have built a 21st Century law enforcement agency committed to transparency, integrity and service. We have not lost sight of the tremendous power prosecutors wield. Prosecutors have the power to initiate investigations, charge cases and recommend sentences to courts. Perhaps more than any other member of the judicial system, our decisions affect whether someone will suffer a loss of liberty. It is with that recognition that I continue to challenge my staff to look at implicit bias that may influence their decisions and work consciously to apply the rule of law fairly and equally in every case.

Aided by Acting First Assistant Prosecutor Romesh C. Sukhdeo and Acting Chief of Detectives, Mitchell G. McGuire III, we are meeting that challenge as we work to
make Essex County the safest urban county in the nation. We have made progress in 2019 but the work continues.

This 2019 Annual Report, published in conjunction with the statistical summary required by the Attorney General, provides an overview of the important work done by the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office last year.

To all the people of Essex County, on behalf of myself and my staff, thank you for the privilege to serve.
A Brief History of
the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office

In 1776, the State of New Jersey ratified its first Constitution (superseded by later Constitutions in 1844 and 1947). Under this Constitution, the elected Governor appointed an Attorney General to enforce the laws of the State. The Attorney General in turn appointed deputies for the various counties, including Essex, to enforce the criminal laws on behalf of the local populace. In 1822, the New Jersey General Assembly passed an act authorizing a more independent Prosecutor of Pleas for each county, to be appointed by the Court of Quarter Session once every five years. A few years later, the Governor was given the authority to appoint each county’s Prosecutor of Pleas.

On Feb. 20, 1829, Amzi Dodd became the first governor-appointed Prosecutor of Pleas for Essex County. The earliest record of a prosecution by Prosecutor Dodd involves “a nuisance in suffering the water to stagnate and become offensive in the old burying ground” in Newark. The first Prosecutor of Pleas worked alone, but by 1877 the Prosecutor required the help of a First Assistant.

As Essex County grew and matters became more complex, the Office grew in size. By 1922, Prosecutor John O. Bigelow employed 28 men, including three Assistant Prosecutors, two Detective Captains, two Lieutenants, and various Detectives and clerks.

In the 1920s and 30’s, cases involving gambling, organized crime and official corruption were growing in number. In October of 1935, the nationally-known organized crime figure Dutch Schultz was shot at the Palace Chop House in Newark. Although the prime suspect was found hanged soon after the incident, the Office continued its investigation and identified Schultz’s real shooter who pled guilty to the murder in 1940.

By 1945, the Office still had only three Assistant Prosecutors, despite a growing number of murder and gambling cases. In 1951, Prosecutor Edward Gaulkin gained attention by successfully prosecuting four men charged with conspiracy, extortion and bribery in the Newark milk scandal case.

In 1959, Governor Robert Meyner nominated Brendan T. Byrne of West Orange as the 25th Prosecutor of Essex County. Prosecutor (and later Governor) Byrne served the Office until 1967. By 1962, there were 16 Assistant Prosecutors, most of whom were part-time employees. Shortly thereafter, the first female Assistant Prosecutor,
June Strelecki, was appointed. Also, during Byrne’s tenure, the “Charlie Squad” was formed, a name coined after members of the public were urged to report illegal gambling by calling a dedicated phone number and asking for “Charlie.”

In 1967, the City of Newark experienced a week-long civil disturbance, which heralded long-term social and economic change in Essex County. These transformations challenged future Prosecutors to respond to changing patterns and volumes of crime with increased professionalism and dedication.

By 1973, the legal staff numbered 63 lawyers, all full-time. County Investigators replaced the former Detectives and were increasingly selected from the ranks of experienced local police officers. Under Prosecutor George Schneider (Prosecutor from 1981 to 1986), the number of Assistant Prosecutors exceeded 100. Increasing resources were dedicated to special squads. The Homicide Squad was expanded and a Narcotics Section, which at first was a joint task force with the Sheriff’s Office, was created. Eventually specialized units were established in Child Abuse, Sex Assault, Arson, Domestic Violence, Megan’s Law and Gangs.

In 1986, Governor Thomas Kean appointed the first African-American Prosecutor in Essex County (and only the second in the State), Herbert H. Tate, Jr. Computerization of the Office was begun and continued in stages throughout the terms of Prosecutor Tate and his successor, Prosecutor Clifford J. Minor.

Also, during their terms, a sexual assault case was brought against a group of high school athletes from Glen Ridge, who in 1993 was convicted of victimizing a 17-year-old mentally handicapped woman. This case, which was handled by Robert D. Laurino, who would later be named Acting Essex County Prosecutor in 2010, was the subject of a popular book, a TV movie, and an episode on the TV show “Law & Order.” Most importantly, the case brought national attention to the issues related to the prosecution of defendants who abuse the developmentally disabled.

In 1998, the first female Prosecutor, Patricia Hurt, was appointed by Governor Christie Whitman. Prosecutor Hurt was followed by Acting Prosecutor Donald Campolo and Acting Prosecutor Paula T. Dow. In the opening years of the 21st Century, the Office responded aggressively to increased auto theft and expanded youth gang activity. By 2003, it completed a second generation of computerization complete with e-mail and Internet access and increased its outreach to the public through its web site (www.njecpo.org), its Victim-Witness Advocacy Office, and its Community Justice Program.

In 2005, Governor Richard Codey swore Acting Prosecutor Dow to the Office of Essex County Prosecutor. During Prosecutor Dow’s years of leadership, the Essex
County Prosecutor’s Office instituted vertical prosecution, increased its resources and outreach to victims and witnesses, opened a state-of-the-art crime scene facility, and participated in a wide variety of cross-agency/cross-jurisdiction collaborations including a state-federal anti-gang and narcotics task force, gun buyback programs, and a successful fugitive safe surrender program held in Newark in November 2009. Prosecutor Dow also emphasized technology development, with the Office updating its computer server infrastructure in 2009 and planning for the implementation of an office-wide, fully integrated electronic case and record management system.

In January 2010, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie appointed Prosecutor Dow as Acting Attorney General of the State of New Jersey. In her place, Chief Assistant Prosecutor Robert D. Laurino, then a 29-year ECPO veteran, who gained public recognition in the trial and conviction of the high school athletes in Glen Ridge, was appointed Acting Essex County Prosecutor.

In February 2011, Gov. Christie appointed Carolyn A. Murray as Acting Essex County Prosecutor. As Acting Prosecutor, she has made victims’ rights a high priority. In addition, the Mental Health Unit was created during her tenure, providing new options to prosecutors and defense attorneys when dealing with offenders who have a history of mental illness. During Acting Prosecutor Murray's term, the Office prepared for the challenge of implementing the legislative bail reform mandate which went into effect on January 1, 2017. Called the New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform Act, this law effectively eliminated cash bail. In preparation, Murray oversaw the implementation of an integrated, office-wide case database system for case management and investigation management.

In July, 2017, Gov. Christie appointed Acting Prosecutor Murray to a judgeship on the Superior Court bench. Once again, Chief Assistant Prosecutor Robert D. Laurino stepped in as Acting Prosecutor, guiding the Office through a time of continuing transition and adaptation to changing criminal justice policies and technology. In September of 2018, Governor Phil Murphy named Theodore N. Stephens II, then serving as the Essex County Surrogate, as Acting Essex County Prosecutor.

The lawyers, detectives and support staff who report to Acting Prosecutor Stephens will continue the work of Amzi Dodd into the 21st Century and are honored to be part of the Essex County Prosecutor's Office.

With thanks to Francis D. Falivena, Jr., Assistant Prosecutor, Retired, an ECPO history
Acting Essex County Prosecutor
Theodore N. Stephens II