Business Administration Unit

The staff of the Business Administration Unit oversee a $38.2 million operating budget, along with Essex County Prosecutor’s Office’s criminal forfeiture accounts. Additionally, the Unit oversees the Office’s 7 major grant-funded programs totaling more than $1 million per year. The Unit provides crucial infrastructure support services at ECPO’s six office sites, including facility management, supply distribution, inventory, purchasing, budgeting, personnel records, time keeping, payroll, and criminal case file storage and retrieval. Capital equipment—including copiers, telephones, fax machines, desk units, printers, and file storage cabinets—is continually monitored to identify and prioritize replacement needs.

The Unit assists the Prosecutor and the executive management team with long-term planning and strategic-decision support, staffing including plans, compensation policies, and capital spending/infrastructure decisions.

The Business Administration Unit’s support functions also include:

- Cooperation with program and financial auditors
- Workers’ Compensation reporting
- Office renovation and safety improvements
- Purchase request processing and shipping receipt
- Supply storage, inventory, and distribution
- Liaison to County, State, and Federal government offices

2020 Accomplishments

The outbreak of the COVID pandemic in March of 2020 provided special challenges to the ECPO Administration function. In addition to planning for office space that relieves crowding and promotes efficiency, the Business Administration Unit had to coordinate with the County of Essex to accommodate the federal and state guidelines and County policy regarding social distancing and facility sanitizing. In cooperation with the County, the Unit facilitated the procurement of protective materials and in computer equipment needed for work-at-home set-up. Our unit helped ECPO management to communicate employee attendance policies and arrangements in response to the crisis.

At the same time, Administration staff worked to maintain its key role in budget planning, procurement oversight, hiring processing, facilities improvements, personnel management, and grant funding oversight. Staff helped to minimize and
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overcome the disruptions that temporarily slowed our key investigative and prosecutorial functions and allowed ECPO personnel to regain productivity and move into a hybrid home and office working arrangement in the second half of the year.
Community Justice Unit

The Community Justice Unit promotes awareness of the role and function of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office. By attending community meetings to address issues related to crime, substance abuse and crime prevention, the Unit serves as a liaison between law enforcement and the residents of Essex County. The Unit is dedicated to creating and executing programs aimed at offering children and teens positive alternatives and interventional strategies designed to prevent delinquency.

The COVID-19 pandemic devasted the urban neighborhoods of Essex County in March 2020. Despite the physical closings of schools, organizations, and businesses, we continued to provide outreach programs to the community. Programs were modified from in-person to virtual and hybrid to comply with The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Community Justice Unit provided in-person and virtual workshops on the following topics:

- Bullying
- Careers in the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office
- Criminal Justice System
- Expungements
- Gang Awareness
- Internet Safety
- Overview of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office
- Sexual Assault Prevention

2020 Accomplishments

This was the 19th consecutive year in which ECPO held a summer internship program to expose high school students to careers in law, law enforcement and government. The 2020 Summer Youth Internship Program was held virtually from July 6th through August 7th. Fifty high school juniors from Essex County participated in this informative program where they took part in college and career readiness workshops. Interns learned about the role and functions of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office. Interns were exposed to various careers in law, law enforcement and government. Interns also participated in workshops that focused on making positive choices, substance abuse prevention, gang awareness and teen dating violence prevention.

The Unit partnered with ADAPT (Alcohol & Drug Abuse Prevention Team of Essex County) and Essex County’s Department of Community Health Services to hold the 6th annual Interfaith Symposium. The Interfaith Symposium was held virtually on October 8th, 15th, 22nd and 29th to provide information sessions on substance abuse resources to clergy and community members. Sessions were also geared
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A youth conference entitled: “What’s it All About?” World Against Violence (W.A.V.) was held to address issues affecting middle school students. Two hundred middle school students from Essex County registered to participate in the virtual youth conference. Students participated in workshops that focused on coping skills during the Covid-19 pandemic, organizational skills, making positive choices, substance abuse prevention, teen dating, and Cyber-Safety.
Media Relations Office

The Office of Media Relations in the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office manages external communications for the largest and busiest Prosecutor’s Office in the State of New Jersey in the largest media market in the country.

The responsibilities of the Media Relations Office include:

- Serving as lead spokesperson for the Essex County Prosecutor and office staff
- Maintaining daily contact with print and broadcast media regarding homicides, arrests, trials, indictments, convictions and other newsworthy developments
- Remaining on-call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for breaking news stories
- Planning and managing press conferences
- Developing and implementing a strategic communications plan with the Prosecutor
- Assisting local police departments with media relations
- Working cooperatively with law enforcement partners at the municipal, state and federal levels
- Working closely with the Open Public Records custodian for the ECPO
- Providing current information to public officials and government agencies on relevant prosecutorial activities
- Educating Assistant Prosecutors and other staff regarding dealing with the press
- Overseeing the production of the ECPO Annual Report and the ECPO Internal Office newsletter
- Assisting with community outreach efforts

2020 Accomplishments

In 2020, the Media Relations Office had to rapidly adjust to the changes brought on by COVID-19, a global pandemic that significantly altered the methods used to
communicate with the press and the public. As in-person press conferences became unsafe and impractical, the ECPO increased the use of social media by utilizing virtual press conferences, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Plans had long been underway to provide the public with even more information via social media, but those plans quickly became essential.

In addition, many newsworthy trials and court proceedings were put on hold because of the pandemic.

Despite shifts in the delivery of information, at all times, the Media Relations Office continued to work to strike a balance between competing interests. On one side of the scale, is the right of victims and the need to protect the integrity of investigations. On the other side, the public's right to know. Transparency is critical to maintaining public confidence in the Office. Yet, confidentiality is often crucial to the successful investigation and prosecution of cases. Even amid a global pandemic, we sought to keep the public informed regarding the status of cases.

Since trials were halted, many of the high-profile cases that garnered press attention in 2019 remained on the docket in 2020, included the following:

**State v. James R. Ray, III** – This is an ongoing case that started in 2018. New York lawyer James Ray, III, 55, is accused of fatally shooting Angela Bledsoe, the 44-year-old mother of his daughter, at the home they shared on North Mountain Avenue in Montclair on Oct. 23, 2018. He was apprehended in Cuba on Oct. 31, 2018 and subsequently returned to New Jersey to face trial.

The Essex County Prosecutor's Office working with the FBI, the Montclair Police Department, the Allentown, PA Police Department, the New Jersey State Police, Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Embassy in Havana, and Customs Enforcement and Removal Operations were able to bring Ray back to the United States where he is still awaiting trial.

**State v. Khalil Wheeler-Weaver** – In this case, serial killer Khalil Wheeler-Weaver was found guilty in December 2019 of killing 20-year-old college student Sarah Butler of Montclair, Robin West, 19, of Philadelphia and Joann Brown, 33, of Newark. He was also found guilty of the sexual assault and attempted murder of a third woman. At the time of the murder, Wheeler-Weaver was working as a security guard for a private security company and had dreams of becoming a police officer. At trial, the state argued successfully that the murders began on Aug. 31, 2016 with the murder of West and continued until the murder of Butler. Much of the case was based on geolocation data that placed Wheeler-Weaver’s phone at or near the scene of the crimes.

Sentencing is pending.
State v. Joseph Porter -- In this case, Porter, 27, of Elizabeth is charged with a Maplewood double murder. He is accused of killing David Kimowitz, a 40-year-old comedy club owner and comedian, along with the family’s nanny 26-year-old, Karen L. Bermudez-Rodriguez, in the Kimowitz’s Maplewood home. Porter, who dated the au pair, is accused of fatally stabbing the two. Kimowitz’s wife and two preschool children were at the Jersey Shore at the time of the fatal attack.

The case is awaiting trial.

State v. Lamont Stephenson – In March of 2019 Stephenson, who was on the FBI’s most wanted list, was returned to New Jersey to face trial for the Oct. 17, 2014 murder of his then fiancée Olga DeJesus, a Newark mother of two. He also killed the family dog, a chihuahua.

Stephenson was arrested in Prince George County Maryland, where he is also charged with the murder of Natina Kiah, 40. He killed her and her cat. He had been living with Kiah. They met while he was living at a homeless shelter. She worked at the shelter as a security guard.

State v. Jovanny Crespo – A Newark police officer, Crespo was charged with aggravated manslaughter for the Jan. 2018 killing of Gregory Griffin, 46, who was shot by Crespo as he fled from police following a traffic stop. A second man in the car was also shot but survived his injuries. The case garnered national attention because Crespo is the first New Jersey police officer to be charged with a homicide for actions taken during the course of employment.
Victim-Witness Advocacy Office

The Essex County Office of Victim-Witness Advocacy was started by the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office in 1982 pursuant to New Jersey law, which requires the county Victim-Witness Coordinator to implement and provide services to crime victims. The Office’s primary mandate is to fulfill the provisions of the New Jersey Constitution and New Jersey statutes which require:

- That crime victims be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect.
- That victims be informed and consulted in matters such as plea bargaining.
- That victims be given the right to be heard at all stages of the criminal justice process.

The Essex County Office of Victim-Witness Advocacy helps victims and witnesses deal with immediate life needs, especially those who live within Essex County’s lower income neighborhoods, who are most at-risk of experiencing violent crime and whose lives are most vulnerable to economic and personal disruption. The Office helps them to find the resources needed to maintain basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, employment, transportation, daycare for pre-school children, etc. It also assists victims and witnesses in dealing with the psychological trauma of crime (which cuts across all economic and social strata) and helps them obtain professional assistance as needed. The Office then helps victims and witnesses to understand and fulfill their rights and responsibilities within the criminal justice system, providing continual communication and coordination regarding case progress and participation in legal proceedings.

As appropriate, the Office accompanies victims to court. Office personnel also assist victims in gaining economic compensation for their losses through insurance, restitution, and the Victims of Crime Compensation Office. The Office assures victims and witnesses that it is equally concerned with their overall well-being as with obtaining the conviction of the offender.

The Office of Victim-Witness Advocacy has a staff with significant training and professional counseling experience in emergency assistance, crisis management and interpersonal violence. The staff includes a Victim-Witness Coordinator, Victim-Witness Advocates and Clerical Assistants. The Coordinator meets bi-weekly with the advocates to review and evaluate cases, discuss progress, and develop service plans to ensure procedural and programmatic compliance with state and federal regulations. The Office is supported in part by state and federal government grants.

2020 Accomplishments:

In 2020, the Victim-Witness Advocacy Office assisted 9,156 victims and witnesses, initiating approximately 97,000 items of correspondence on their behalf despite the
demands the global pandemic placed on unit staff. Unit staff remained accessible to county residents seeking vital criminal justice-related services while working in the office and remotely.

The Unit continued to expand its formal relocation program in 2020, through which approximately 1,073 program clients and their families were assisted. This program advocates on behalf of victims and witnesses who have been threatened, intimidated, or harassed because they have provided information to law enforcement regarding organized crime, gang-related, and domestic violence cases. Trained advocates provide survivors of crime with referrals to social service agencies that offer emergency shelter placement, transitional and permanent housing, food and clothing, security, and protection. The advocates also work closely with local housing authorities, welfare agencies, Social Security offices and school districts to ensure that the victim/witness is fully and successfully integrated into the new living environment.

Unit staff continued to enhance the Victim-Witness Advocacy Unit’s portal on the Office’s general website during the calendar year. The Victim-Witness portal is colorful, interactive, user-friendly, visually appealing, and easily understood by those who access the pages. The website content includes information on the amendments to the Crime Victims’ Bill of Rights, notification process, the crisis
reaction, the criminal justice process, information on how to obtain a temporary/final restraining domestic violence order, tips for witness testimony and V.I.N.E. (Victim Information Notification Everyday).

In the revised structure and format of the website section, the information is arranged alphabetically by victim’s crime type. Unit staff also developed a digital application that delivers information about local support services available to Essex County crime victims via a desktop, smart phone, and/or tablet. Crime victims will be able to enter the service needed and a zip code and receive agency information in their area. The app is equipped with agency locations, hours of operation, services provided and fees (if applicable), maps of walking and driving routes, parking areas near the agency where the crime victim is seeking services, and links to New Jersey Transit bus and train schedules for public transportation information. The app is scheduled to launch in the of spring 2021.

Further, the Victim Witness Unit conducted nine community outreach forums throughout 2020. Approximately 100 community residents, including high school and college students, received information on the services provided through the Victim-Witness Advocacy Office.

Finally, Unit staff also organized the Office's annual “Christmas Holiday Toy Drive” to assist needy families, many of which were assisted by the Victim-Witness Advocacy Unit, in December 2020. Through the generosity of office staff, unit staff collected $1,700 in cash, gift cards, and toys and donated the funds to seven local social services agencies who, in turn, distributed funds to those in need residing in Essex County.
Record Room