In 2008, the total number of adult defendant cases reviewed by the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office was 21,018. Of those defendant cases, 7,468 were indicted or charged by accusation. During the court year period July, 2008 to June, 2009, ECPO’s total adult indictments filed involving first and second degree charges was 23.4% of the total for all New Jersey County Prosecutor’s Offices.

In 2008, the total number of juveniles involved in delinquency case filings in Essex County was 2,907.

The in-service Continuing Legal Education program offered by the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office to its Assistant Prosecutors has been endorsed by the New Jersey and Pennsylvania CLE Boards. Participating attorneys will satisfy all of their CLE requirements under Rule 1:42-2(b)(4). It is the first program of its kind in New Jersey.

(Statistics from N.J. Division of Criminal Justice, Analysis of Prosecutors’ Data, and from the Administrative Office of the Courts, N.J. Superior Court)
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“The mission of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office is to SEEK Justice, to SERVE Justice, and to DO Justice.”

Paula T. Dow, Essex County Prosecutor
MESSAGE FROM
Prosecutor Paula T. Dow

The mission of the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office is to seek justice, to serve justice and to do justice.

The Essex County Prosecutor’s Office continues to handle approximately one quarter of all criminal prosecutions in the State of New Jersey. On an annual basis, the office reviews approximately 20,000 cases and issues approximately 7,000 indictments. By far, the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office is the busiest prosecutor’s office in the State.

In the 2008 and 2009 court year, the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office continued to make significant progress in fighting crime.

We searched and implemented new ways to address gang violence. We created a gang and drug interdiction/intelligence unit specifically designed to dismantle dangerous street gangs and drug organizations, while reducing gun violence, narcotics distribution and other forms of violent crimes in Essex County. In the last two years alone, we arrested more than 300 gang members and gang associates in Essex County.

One of our proudest achievements was to bring CSI to Essex County. We opened a state-of-the-art Crime Scene Unit which has changed the way criminal investigations
are conducted throughout the county. In addition, we opened a new homicide unit equipped with state-of-the-art interview rooms and are wired for the audio and video recording of statements.

Our Trial Unit is now Vertical – similar to our federal partners at the U.S. Attorneys Office. The Vertical Court system streamlines prosecutions, reduces time from arrest to disposition, fosters greater accountability and provides better utilization of limited resources. We established a true sustaining partnership with local, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies to suppress crime in Essex County. This partnership allowed our office to cast an even greater net over criminals.

Last year, our conviction rate climbed to 84 percent. This marks the highest conviction rate for Essex County since 2000.

We initiated a Corruption Unit whose sole function is to pursue complaints of corruption by public employees as well as complaints by citizens regarding police misconduct. In the one year that we have devoted additional personnel to this important area, my office has investigated 83 matters, and charged 22 public employees employed in diverse areas such as municipal attorney offices, the post office, schools, corrections, and sanitation for breaches of the public trust.

Our Vehicle Fire Initiative within our Arson Task Force garnered national attention for their aggressive prosecutions in combating criminals who set fire to their vehicles to defraud the insurance industry.

We partnered with the U.S. Marshals and its Fugitive Safe Surrender Program which drew more than 4,000 fugitives who were wanted for non-violent felony and misdemeanor warrants.
We announced and funded a multi-jurisdictional Gun Amnesty Buyback Program, the first of its kind in the county’s history. More than 700 guns were turned in as a result of the two-day gun amnesty buyback program for the cities of East Orange, Irvington, and Newark. County residents turned out in record numbers at designated churches and received up to $200 per weapon.

And finally, we visited, along with other Essex County Law Enforcement officials, UMDNJ–University Hospital in Newark as a special gesture of gratitude, especially to the members of the hospital’s Emergency Medical Services (EMS) unit and New Jersey Trauma Center, to thank them for their tremendous dedication and effort to save lives. The Hospital is northern New Jersey’s only Level-1 trauma center, and is a leader in the advancement of trauma care in the State and the nation.

*During the past Thanksgiving holiday, two special guests (whose lives were saved) and their loved ones attended the visit to offer their thanks to the employees who truly save lives.*
A BRIEF HISTORY

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 were convicted for victimizing a 17 year-old mentally handicapped woman. This case was the subject of a popular book, a TV movie, and an episode on the TV show “Law & Order.”

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 responded aggressively to evolving challenges in the law enforcement arena. The 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 buy-back 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, 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. The lawyers, detectives and support staff who report to him will continue the work of Amzi Dodd into the 21st Century, and are honored to be part of the Office of the Essex County Prosecutor.

(With thanks to Francis D. Falivena, Jr., Assistant Prosecutor, Retired, an ECPO history enthusiast.)