

New Jersey's Prosecutors - Innovative Programs -



National Prosecutors' Consortium



July 2019

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Acknowledgements

The National Prosecutors' Consortium (NPC) is a collaboration between Prosecutors' Center for Excellence and Justice & Security Strategies funded by the Office of Justice Programs of the U.S. Department of Justice. This report was prepared by Kristine Hamann and Sarah Solano Geisler of Prosecutors' Center for Excellence. Special thanks to former Hunterdon County Prosecutor Anthony Kearns and his assistant Christine Musacchio for their excellent and tireless assistance with this project. Thanks also to Prosecutor Angelo Onofri, and Acting Prosecutors Theodore Stephens II and Michael Williams for contributing to this report.

The National Prosecutor Consortium project was supported by Award No. 2015-DP-BX-KOO4 awarded to Justice & Security Strategies, Inc. by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

The Evolving Role of the Prosecutor

Over the last forty years, there has been a dramatic transformation and expansion of prosecutors' mission, to not only vigorously prosecute criminal cases, but also to engage in crime prevention, problem solving and community partnerships. Prosecutors' fundamental goal is to protect the community and ensure justice when enforcing the law. Traditionally, a prosecutor's role was a limited and relatively passive one - to evaluate and prosecute arrests made by the police.¹ That role has expanded and evolved significantly. The shift is driven by the need for more complex solutions that not only seek positive outcomes for victims, but also strive for long-term solutions for preventing crime and assisting those who are entangled in the criminal justice system.

Prosecutors are uniquely situated to be effective in carrying out these new initiatives. They play a pivotal role in the criminal justice system, making decisions and exercising discretion about whether to prosecute, whom to prosecute, and how to prosecute. Also, as leaders in law enforcement, prosecutors can work with the police and other partners to improve community relationships and to build trust in the criminal justice system.



1. Catherine M. Coles, *Evolving Strategies in 20th- Century American Prosecution*, in *THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE AMERICAN PROSECUTOR, 182-187* (John L. Worrall & M. Elaine Nugent-Borakov, eds., 2008).

The National Prosecutors' Consortium

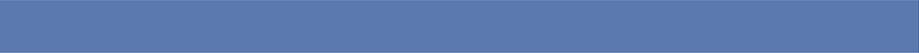
The National Prosecutors' Consortium (NPC) project is designed to collect information on innovative programs employed by prosecutor offices, to assist prosecutors in developing and deploy

ing new programs, and to expand their research capabilities. The main areas of focus are the prevention of violent crime, community engagement, and encouraging victim/witness cooperation.

Many of the nation's prosecutors relish the opportunities presented by their expanded roles in the criminal justice system and have adopted innovative programs. However, the nature of their new initiatives is impacted by the size and resources of the organization. A large office with plentiful resources can implement multiple forward-thinking initiatives that impact a large segment of their population. Conversely, a smaller jurisdiction may only have the capacity to develop a smaller, yet still meaningful initiative.

Innovative programs described in this paper are newly developed initiatives undertaken by an office in keeping with its unique resources and the needs of its community. Ideas for new programs are freely shared amongst prosecutors and can nevertheless be innovative when they are introduced, implemented and customized to suit the needs of a particular office. For instance, a program that would be considered innovative in a smaller office, may be more common-place in a larger office. We seek to highlight those offices that are embracing their new role by working within their capacity to bring effective and proactive programs to their communities.

As part of the NPC project, a prosecutor survey was administered during 2019 at the county level across the United States on a state-by-state basis. The survey captures baseline information about prosecutor offices and collects information about the various evolving and non-traditional aspects of a prosecutor's office, such as alternatives to incarceration, preventing violent crime, community outreach, victim/witness support, and treatment programs.



Overview of New Jersey Prosecutor Programs

New Jersey prosecutor offices range in size and in the types of communities that they serve. Some serve large cities like the Essex County office which encompasses the city of Newark, while others work in suburban districts or rural areas. The available resources and staff vary greatly between the offices, as does the needs of their communities. The prosecutors are appointed by the New Jersey Attorney General, who in turn is appointed by the Governor.

To their credit, almost all (95%) of the New Jersey prosecutor offices completed the survey. The survey demonstrates that New Jersey prosecutors participate in a wide variety of programs and initiatives. These programs include Drug courts, Victim and Witness Assistance, Truancy initiatives, Community Collaborations, Youth Education programs, and Restitution support.

The survey found that 90% of New Jersey’s prosecutors engage in problem solving courts or other programs that offer alternatives to incarceration. Every office offered Victim Assistance programs, and many had Restitution programs (70%), Witness Assistance programs (95%), victim services even when there is no arrest (95%), and Community Affairs Units (80%).

Community programs that prosecutors either run or participate in are also common. New Jersey’s prosecutors are involved with Co-Located Child Abuse programs (90%), Youth Education programs (100%) and community engagement (90%). They also have Violence Reduction programs (85%), Co-Located Domestic Violence programs (60%), Adult Education programs (90%) and Truancy programs (5%). Some even sponsor sports programs (35%), Neighborhood Clean-Ups (10%) and Re-Entry programs (15%).

2. Solomon, S.E., Uchida, C.D., Connor, C., Swatt, M.L, Revier, L, Quigley, A. M., & Hock, S. (2019) *National Prosecutors’ Consortium, Survey Highlights: New Jersey, Justice & Security Strategies.*

Innovative Programs - Examples

To demonstrate the variety of innovative programs initiated by prosecutors, three offices are highlighted: Essex, a large urban county close to New York; Mercer, a mid-sized county in central New Jersey; and Hunterdon, a small county on the west side of the state bordering part of Pennsylvania.

The Essex County program, through the provision of crisis intervention training, equips and empowers community members, law enforcement officers, faith groups, and other allied organizations to address domestic violence issues in their community. The Mercer County program provides much-needed books to local schools in an effort to improve book access to inner city children. Finally, the Hunterdon County program with just eight prosecutors brings together faith leaders and community members to collectively address substance abuse and crime.

Essex County Prosecutor's Office

Population: 808,285

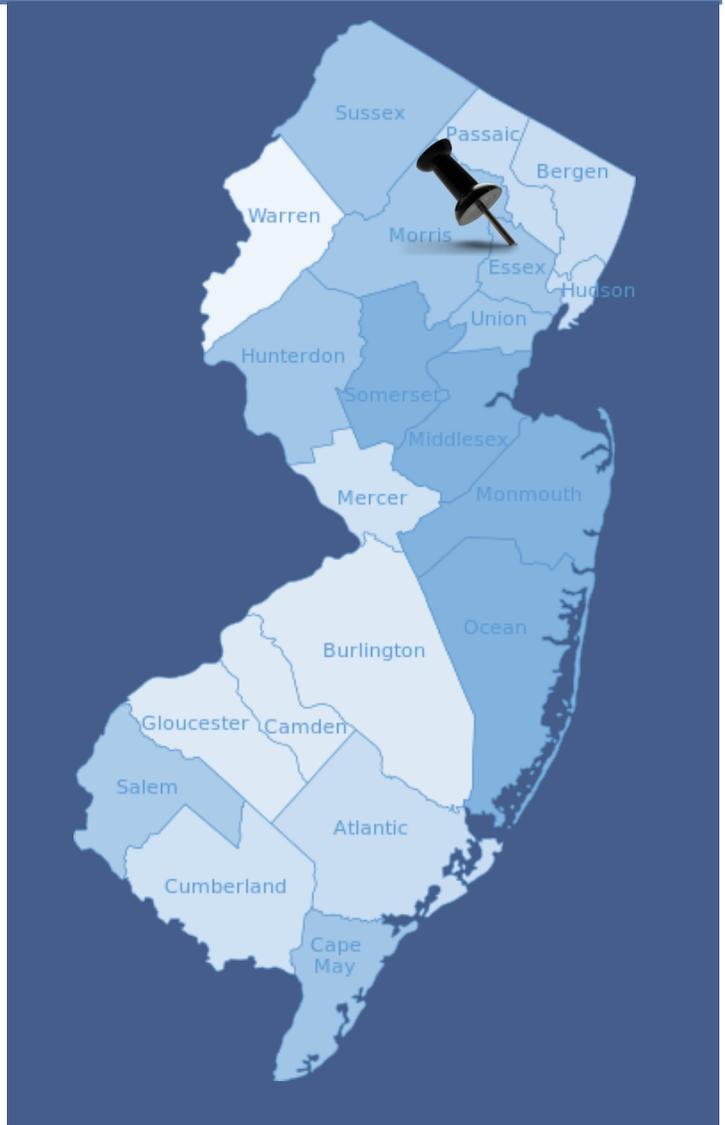
Number of Prosecutors: 129 full-time prosecutors

Sanctuary

The Essex County Prosecutor's Office of Victim-Witness Advocacy implemented a robust community initiative called "Sanctuary" in 2010 in order to better address domestic violence issues. Sanctuary provides crisis intervention training to community members, police departments, social service agencies, religious groups, and other allied organizations. It equips and empowers a wide variety of citizens to effectively respond to victims of intimate partner violence-related assault, sexual assault, child abuse, and survivors of homicide victims who were killed as a result of intimate partner violence.³ Thus far, the program has graduated 350 students, and the total is expected to increase to 382 when the current class completes its training.

Sanctuary training is a free, intensive and interactive 80 - 120 hour program that takes place at the Essex County Prosecutor's Office. The training involves a basic and an advanced course. The basic course includes presentations and interactive exercises on such topics as:

- ◇ assisting underserved victim populations
- ◇ crisis intervention and crisis counseling
- ◇ the effects of trauma on an individual's developmental stages and the spiritual dimension of trauma



- ◇ diversity and cultural aspects of criminal victimization
- ◇ crime victim/legal advocacy
- ◇ effective communication skills, ethics and professionalism
- ◇ local area resources and networks
- ◇ the criminal and family court processes.

The advanced course includes:

- ◇ current responses and trends in crime victim advocacy including trauma informed care, trauma bonding, captivity theory, and the science of attraction
- ◇ the politics of power in intimate relationships, ritualistic abuse, primary aggressor, the topology of battering behavior, social aggression and the bystander effect
- ◇ the use of technology as a means to stalk and terrorize, intimate partner violence-related workplace violence, working with the media, human trafficking, the use of technology, assisting underserved victim populations (part II), spirituality, and self-care.

The training benefits those who have applied for membership on their municipal police department's domestic violence response teams, are involved in other community activities, or work for local area social service agencies. Upon completion of the training, volunteers who are members of local churches, mosques, synagogues, municipal police departments, social service organizations, and emergency agencies in Essex County are able to provide culturally sensitive outreach to domestic violence victims and their families in a 24- to 72-hour period.

3. See, <http://www.njecpo.org/vw/announcement.php> (last viewed 6/10/19)



Mercer County Prosecutor's Office

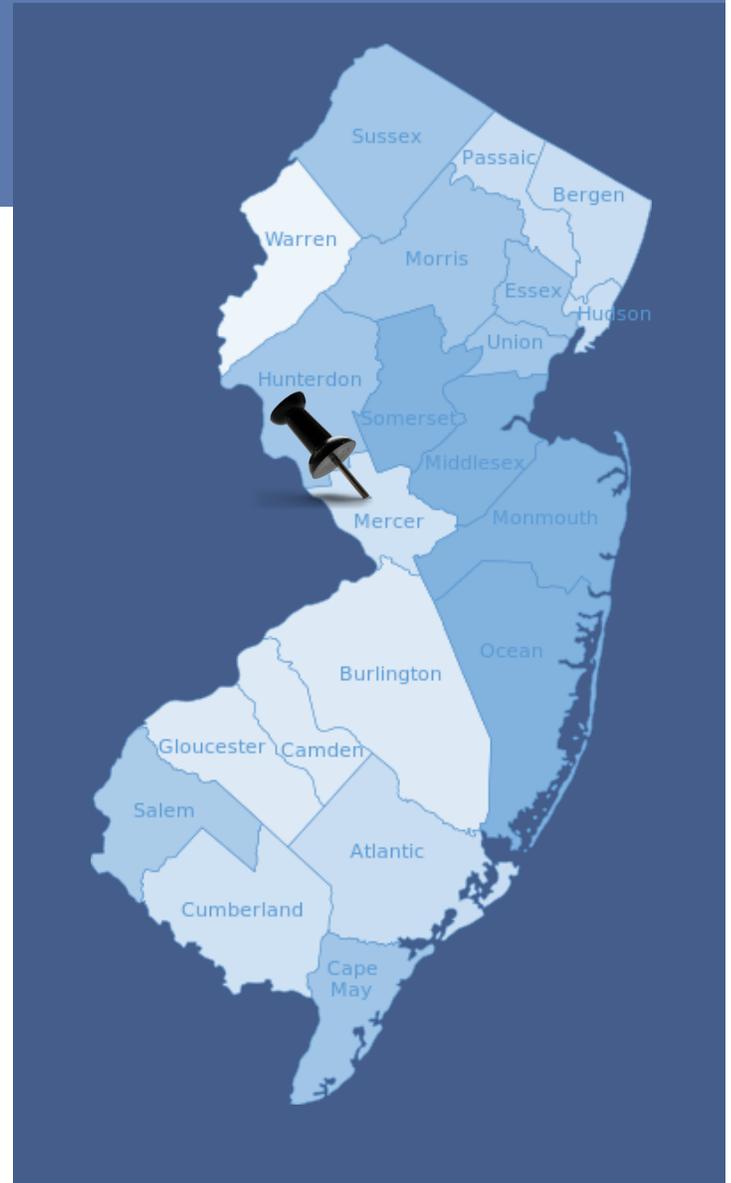
Population: 373,733

Number of Prosecutors: 47 full-time prosecutors

Code Read

In January 2017, before Angelo J. Onofri took his oath as Mercer County Prosecutor, he met with Lisa Willever, a former elementary school teacher and award-winning author who has written several books for children. He learned a staggering statistic: There are 17 books in the home for every child in the suburbs, but in the inner cities, there is only one book per 100 children.

Studies show that access to books can have a direct correlation to future life successes, but the unfortunate reality is that many families in the United States have no children's books at home. Approximately 42 percent of American children — more than 31 million — grow up in families that lack the money to cover basic necessities like food, rent, child care and trans-



portation—let alone books. The problem is compounded by the fact that schools in inner cities like Trenton, New Jersey, also lack the funding to supply their libraries and classrooms with children’s books.

This reality was unacceptable to Prosecutor Onofri, understanding that merely providing access to books can be the most important step in encouraging literacy development. While reading is something that can get overlooked in the context of other societal problems like the opioid epidemic and gun violence, it is nonetheless extremely important. He therefore committed his office and its resources to ensuring as many underserved young people as possible in Trenton have access to books through the inception of a program known as Code Read.

During the next two years, the Prosecutor’s Office partnered with the Mercer County Bar Association for a book drive each spring. Through the efforts of area legal offices, a local Barnes and Noble, community organizations, the Trenton police and fire departments, and individual donations, about 2,000 books were collected. The Prosecutor’s Office also teamed up with two Mercer County Eagle Scout candidates on their service projects. Through the hard work of David Ribiero of Hamilton, NJ, and Phil Sapienza of Robbinsville, NJ, an astonishing 8,500 books were collected.

As a result, elementary schools in Trenton received thousands of books. Schools hosted book fairs where students could select books to take home, oftentimes their faces lighting up at the prospect of a new book, sometimes their very first. Remaining books were used to stock the shelves of the school libraries and classrooms.

The Prosecutor’s Office community outreach doesn’t stop with books. Each year, the Mercer County Prosecutor’s Office donates funds to the Nicky Fifth Foundation to provide scholarships for Trenton schoolchildren to attend a weeklong summer camp at the Old Barracks, a touchstone for colonial and revolutionary history in New Jersey. The camp introduces students to an immersive and interactive method of learning about life during the

American Revolution and the contributions of Trenton. During the summer, the prosecutor's office partners with churches, the city of Trenton, community organizations, local businesses and civic-minded individuals to give away hundreds of backpacks filled with school supplies to Trenton schoolchildren through community outreach events.

Books and camps are not a cure-all for the systemic problems faced by Trenton's underprivileged community, but they are certainly a start. The need for books, school supplies, and educational opportunities is evident, and the Prosecutor's Office is working diligently to make these essentials easier to obtain.



Pictured left to right: Robert E. Lytle, (then) president of the Mercer County Bar Association; (then) Trenton Mayor Eric E. Jackson; Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo J. Onofri; (then) Trenton Police Director Ernest Parrey Jr.; and Mercer County Prosecutor's Office (then) Chief of Detectives Veldon Harris.

Hunterdon County Attorney's Office

Population: 125,000

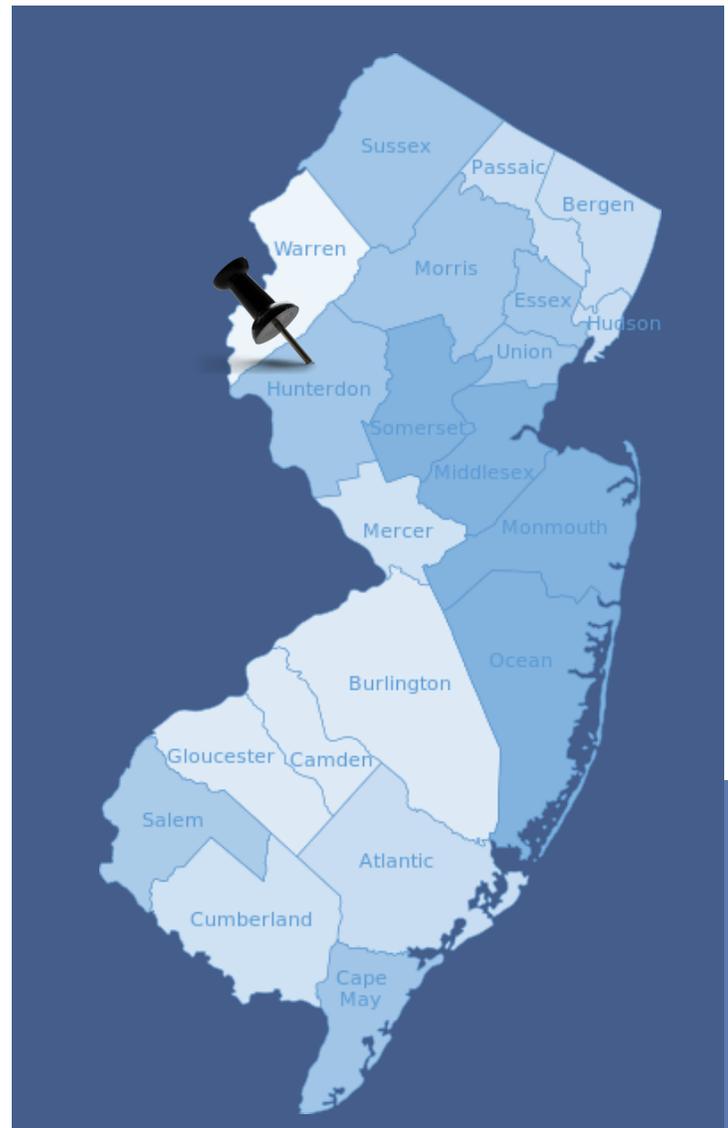
Number of Prosecutors: 8 full-time prosecutors

One Voice

In 2012, the Hunterdon County Prosecutor Anthony Kearns formed a “One Voice” steering committee made up of faith-based leaders and community groups with the goal of working together to reduce substance abuse and crime. Prevention Resources, Inc. and the Safe Communities Coalition were the initial partners, but after the committee was formed, others soon joined.

The mission of “One Voice” is for faith leaders to create a strong, common, coordinated message to help spread awareness on the dangers of substance abuse and other community crime-related concerns. Since faith-based leaders have a respected and strong connection to their communities, they can be on the front line of reducing substance abuse and preventing crime, especially if they are all giving the same message at the same time. Each faith-based group tailors the message in the manner that is most appropriate for their congregations. Current topics have been the heroin epidemic, gun violence and suicide prevention.

Since the community groups that partner with One Voice often must work with religious organizations to receive grants, they have provided resources and logistics to support the One Voice program. Summits for faith-based leaders have been held to teach the leaders about criminal justice-related topics of concern to their congrega-





Faith leaders and former county prosecutor Anthony Kearns.

tions. Benefited by the knowledge from these Summits, the faith-based leaders have effectively provided the needed information and guidance to their communities.

One Voice has been a positive way for the Hunterdon prosecutor to work with the county's religious leaders. It is a two-way street. On one hand, law enforcement and the prosecutor provide needed information about preventing crime, while on the other, the faith leaders can connect law enforcement to their communities. When faced with controversial criminal justice issues or community unrest, the religious leaders can provide excellent guidance to law enforcement and the Hunterdon Prosecutor's Office.