

Nation's prosecutors gather in Salt Lake City to discuss best practices for 21st century

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SALT LAKE CITY — Prosecutors are looked to as the people who are supposed to keep their communities safe by ensuring criminals are found guilty in court and sentenced to jail or prison.

But the job of a county or district attorney has become more involved than that in recent years, according to Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill. While the overall mission — to seek justice — hasn't changed, today prosecutors must make sure they are locking up the right people by considering factors such as mental health and drug addiction.

On Thursday, attorneys from across the nation began a two-day conference at the Little America Hotel focusing on the topic of "Best Practices for the 21st Century Modern Prosecutor."

"The role of the public prosecutor and of leadership has really become a much broader responsibility. It's about fiscal management, it's about recidivism rate, it's about developing collaborative partnerships that are really trying to answer the ills of our society which are far more than simple prosecution," Gill said.

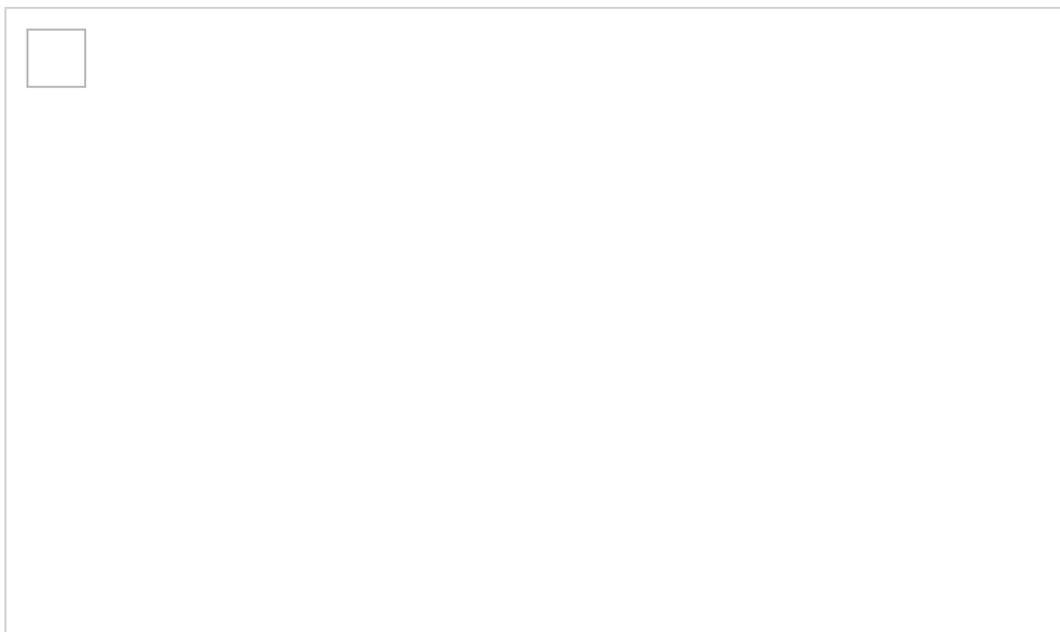
Prosecutors need to meet the needs of all demographics of their communities, including minorities and those in poverty, he said.

A roundtable discussion was held Thursday morning with the county attorneys of some of the largest jurisdictions in the U.S., including Los Angeles District Attorney Jackie Lacey; Denver District Attorney Beth McCann; Maricopa County, Arizona, Attorney William Montgomery; Arlington County, Virginia, Commonwealth Attorney Theo Stamos; and New York County District Attorney Cyrus Vance.

Lacey concurred that the role of prosecutors has "changed dramatically" over time, but the overall mission remained the same. Prosecutors today need to examine the root causes of crime and know data like recidivism rates and the racial demographics of crime victims.

She also said the modern prosecutor needs to not be apologetic for holding those who victimize people accountable.

"We've got to regenerate that spirit of pride that caused each of us to leave maybe a more lucrative lifestyle and dedicate our lives to making sure our communities are safe," she said.



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McCann talked about the need to reform juvenile justice in her community, and finding better ways to deal with juveniles who commit violent crimes such as shootings, rather than locking them up in adult prison for 20 years to life.

"I really struggle with what is the appropriate thing to do with a 14-year-old who shoots and either kills someone or permanently maims that child for life?" she said. "I do believe that adolescent brains are not fully developed, and the areas that control impulse and judgment are the ones that are not fully developed."

Vance said while violent crime has dropped dramatically in New York City, advances in technology have created other opportunities for criminals.

"I simply don't think we have a clue on how to deal with cybercrime at the national level," he said. "Cybercrime is going to continue to explode. I believe we are not getting the national leadership from the federal government on how they can help us work in collaboration with them to address these massive cyberissues."

"I used to think when I was a young prosecutor that all I had to care about was Manhattan, downtown, uptown," he continued. "Today our defensive perimeter is in Europe. It's in Singapore. This is where people are attacking us from. So today, in our office, we have to think completely differently about how we defend Manhattan."

Montgomery said he is disturbed by a growing trend of politicization of the prosecution's function.

"I don't believe that there is progressive justice or conservative justice. There's no such thing as Republican justice or Democrat justice," he said.

While the prosecutors gathered at the conference may have differences of opinion on some topics, "I venture to say that when it comes to criminal justice issues, that there isn't much daylight between any of us, regardless of whether you have a particular party affiliation or run in a partisan election," he said.

Montgomery noted that criminals don't play politics or check voter registration cards before victimizing people.

All prosecutors agreed that another important aspect of their offices moving forward was establishing a connection with their communities and educating them on the job of prosecutors, as well as remain transparent with how decisions are made. They said they must let the public know about the good proactive work they're doing in addition to the people they are locking up.