

NEWS RELEASE

Spencer B. Merriweather III
District Attorney

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DA Merriweather announces 2020 priorities, initiatives

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – As Mecklenburg County prosecutors and staff hit the ground running to launch a new year of working to seek justice for all, District Attorney Spencer B. Merriweather III today announced a number of initiatives and priorities that will direct his office's work in 2020. A trial initiative is scheduled to bring 20 homicide defendants to trial this year and push other firearm-related offenses to the top of the office's trial priorities. DA Merriweather is also pursuing ways to work more efficiently with criminal justice partners, advocating for pretrial custody policies based on risk and not money, and expanding the office's reach in the community.

Prioritizing homicides and gun-related trials

With the year's first homicide trial currently underway, the District Attorney's Homicide Team has launched a **2020 homicide trial initiative**. By the end of the year, the team plans to take 20 homicide cases to trial in order to bring justice for victims and their families.

The Homicide Team has long worked to hold offenders accountable in a timely fashion, recognizing that the community deserves swift resolution and that the strength of evidence and availability of witnesses can diminish if a trial is delayed. In 2019, the team tried 13 homicide cases.

This year, the District Attorney's Office has designated an increased number of court sessions to the Homicide Team. Prosecutors on this team will also pair with other experienced prosecutors within the office to expand the team's ability to try more cases. The 2020 trial initiative follows a year in which Charlotte experienced a spike in the number of homicides. There are currently 75 defendants who have pled not guilty in homicide cases and are awaiting trial. By dedicating more court time to homicides, the District Attorney's Office is working to ensure these cases can be quickly brought to trial for the sake of grieving families.

DA Merriweather has also directed his prosecutors to **prioritize gun-related cases** as they plan their trial sessions. Defendants who are accused of using firearms during the course of any crime – whether it be a burglary or an armed robbery or trafficking in drugs – will be placed at the top of the list as the office's prosecution teams schedule trials.

DA Merriweather is also working to acquire more courtroom time in 2020. He has requested additional courtrooms and judges this year from the N.C. Administrative Office of the Courts.

Increasing efficiency in and out of the courtroom

Each felony case follows a criminal administrative plan that sets out a number of court dates. Many of these court dates simply involve the attorneys acknowledging that the case is moving forward. In 2020, DA Merriweather will seek an **overhaul of the administrative plan** to create a system that saves court time, improves efficiency and maintains important checks and balances between prosecutors and defense attorneys.

Additionally, DA Merriweather is **calling on local District Court officials to join other large-volume jurisdictions in this state in allowing low-level felonies to be resolved in District Court**. Refusal to resolve these cases in District Court unnecessarily increases the volume of cases in local Superior Court courtrooms. If defendants charged with low-level felonies were permitted to plead guilty in District Court, it would inevitably allow for more Superior Court resources to be devoted toward violent crime cases.

The District Attorney's Office is also exploring ways in which to **revamp the process by which police officers present the evidence they have discovered in each felony case**. This process is often referred to by prosecutors and police as "papering." After an arrest is made, officers are asked to meet with a prosecutor within a set number of days to share the details of the case so that the prosecutor can determine whether there is enough evidence to proceed or whether additional investigation is necessary. Delays in this process can stall serious cases from proceeding to Superior Court or unnecessarily keep defendants in custody for charges that cannot be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. The District Attorney's Office is examining options that will allow officers to share information about certain cases with prosecutors in a less time-consuming fashion, enabling prosecution decisions to be achieved in a more timely manner.

The District Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Western District of North Carolina are **working together to identify a more effective method of cooperation that would allow the federal government to engage in more local firearm and violent crime cases**. More details about this initiative are forthcoming.

Community initiatives

In 2019, DA Merriweather began exploring potential **community justice models** that would place prosecutors directly into local neighborhoods to build relationships and trust, and to serve as a resource for neighborhoods that are working to combat crime. DA Merriweather has visited other jurisdictions where this model was implemented, and these communities have seen significant success. The state's current funding structure does not provide for a community justice model. In 2020, DA Merriweather will continue to monitor community safety plans developed by city and county government partners, and he looks forward to opportunities to contribute elements of community justice programming where appropriate.

The District Attorney's Office continues to advocate for the **creation of a Family Justice Center** in Mecklenburg County. Since before taking office, DA Merriweather has been a strong advocate for this initiative designed to offer wrap-around services to survivors of intimate partner violence, child and elder violence and sexual assault, as well as their families. DA Merriweather is pleased to be a partner in the formation of a new Survivor Resource Center, which is expected to open this year and is widely seen as an initial step in the journey toward a full-service Family Justice Center.

Legislative action

DA Merriweather has long supported **preventative detention**, a policy that would remove money from the equation when determining a defendant's pretrial custody status. Preventative detention would allow judges making pretrial release decisions the ability to ask one simple question: Should this defendant be released or detained? Money should not be a factor, DA Merriweather believes. Just as a defendant accused of a low-level offense should not be kept in custody simply because he cannot afford bail, a defendant who evidence shows has committed a violent crime and is a threat to the community should not be able to buy his way out of custody. This makes preventative detention, which is used by the federal government, a more equitable option. Enacting preventative detention would require legislative changes by the N.C. General Assembly, and DA Merriweather will continue to advocate for this reform.

Court resources from the state – not only for the District Attorney's Office but also for judges, clerks, court reporters and more – are determined by an outdated statewide formula that does not account for the volume of cases in Mecklenburg County and logistical issues such as the amount of time necessary to review an increased amount of evidence from body-worn camera footage. The result is a calculation of resources that does not adequately meet the community's needs. DA Merriweather is working with state officials to **advocate for additional court staff and courtrooms** needed to manage Mecklenburg County's caseload.

Note: For more information about the District Attorney's Office, visit www.charmeckda.com. For updates and other information, "like" the DA's Office on Facebook at www.facebook.com/charmeckda and follow us on Twitter: @CharMeckDA.

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