



Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office

FROM THE DESK OF DA MERRIWEATHER

The District Attorney's Office is responsible for the prosecution of criminal offenses in Mecklenburg County. Each month, this newsletter provides information about court happenings, initiatives being used to combat crime, the DA's work in the community, and more.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health care improves safety for all

It's a sad truth that many people do not receive a mental health diagnosis or treatment until they have been charged or even convicted of a crime.

The DA's Office recognizes that access to mental health services is critical not only to reducing recidivism but also to preventing people from entering the criminal justice system at all and keeping the entire community safe. But we also recognize that disparities within our community often prevent people from accessing the care they need.

For these reasons and more, we have worked with court partners for years in Wellness Court, a five-phase program for people suffering from severe and persistent mental illness or major depressive disorder. Participants come into the program after being convicted of a crime, and the program uses a model similar to drug treatment courts. Participants appear before a judge every two weeks, and the judge has a conversation with them about their progress. A team of advocates and court personnel meet clients in the community, ensure they are taking medications, and help them find employment and housing. They receive therapy, as well as peer support from someone who has also gone through this process. But waiting until a criminal case is resolved to get someone into Wellness Court means delaying critical services for someone in need. That is why Wellness Court availability will soon expand to allow entry to defendants who want to join the program before their case is resolved.

In the case of mental health, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. We must start with our young people. On May 8, DA Spencer Merriweather joined medical professionals, parents, advocates, educators, and more at an [event hosted by N.C. Attorney General Josh Stein](#) in Charlotte. Together, they discussed some of the most serious issues confronting our youth and how their mental health has been impacted by social media, the pandemic, and substance use. May is Mental Health Awareness Month.



LEGISLATION

DA Merriweather has been in contact with state legislators to advocate for [House Bill 813](#), the Pretrial Integrity Act. This bill would make changes to pretrial release laws, including requiring judges rather than magistrates to be responsible for setting bond amounts for defendants charged with certain offenses. These changes would bring more integrity to pretrial practices, better ensure the peace of our neighborhoods, and ease safety concerns of victims and witnesses as they await justice. The bill, which is also supported by CMPD Chief Johnny Jennings and Chief District Court Judge Elizabeth Trosch, passed the N.C. House of Representatives and has moved to the N.C. Senate for consideration. To improve employee recruitment, DA Merriweather also advocates for [House Bill 695](#), which would study a possible pay structure that allows additional pay for prosecutors and public defenders based on cost of living in each district.

EXPLORING

The DA's 2022-2023 Exploring program for high school students came to a close this month as our students took on the roles of prosecutors and defense attorneys during a [mock trial](#) at the courthouse. This program, which runs in partnership with the Boy Scouts, teaches students about legal careers. The next session will launch in the fall. [Click here](#) to learn more.



FAQ: My child is interested in legal careers. What programs are available to help them prepare?

In addition to the [DA's Exploring program](#) mentioned above, there are a number of programs available to area students who are interested in pursuing legal careers. The local judicial district's Trial Court Administrator's Office offers [Court Camp](#), a week-long summer program that gives students ages 14-18 a behind-the-scenes look at the court system. Another program is [Teen Court](#), an alternative justice system for juveniles who take responsibility for their actions. Teen volunteers are trained to act as attorneys and jurors. This year, our federal counterparts at the U.S. Attorney's Office based in Charlotte will host a [Summer Law Camp](#). Applications are due May 25.

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