

Lee County District Attorney's Office



2022 Year In Review

Jessica Ventiere
Lee County District Attorney

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Letter From The District Attorney

Throughout my 18 years as a prosecutor, I've discovered that many people don't know who their District Attorney is, much less what the District Attorney does. I'm hoping to change that with our annual "Year In Review Report."

Last year, we focused on ways to improve the overall efficiency of the office, placing particular importance on timely and effectively resolving cases.

Additionally, we continued to build and strengthen our in-house community support programs and initiatives. Most importantly, we explored ways our office could have a direct impact on reducing violent crime in our communities.

We recognize public safety begins with crime prevention. We believe that supporting our local non-profits that directly or indirectly impact crime prevention is energy well spent. With that in mind, we strive to be involved with our community, helping to educate the public about domestic violence, literacy's impact on incarceration rates, addiction, elder abuse, teens and digital citizenship, and so much more.

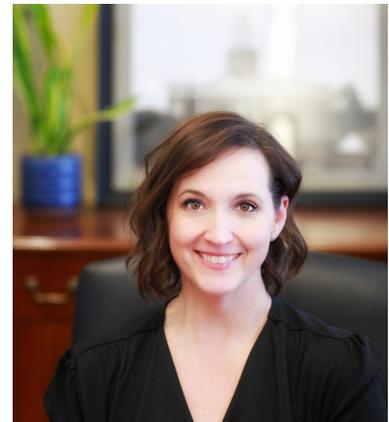
Our goals for 2024 are just as ambitious, and I look forward to sharing with you again next year. I am honored and grateful to serve as your District Attorney and proudly present our 2022 Year In Review Report.

Contact Us

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Facebook: Lee County District Attorney's Office



Jessica L. Ventiere
Lee County District Attorney

WHO WE ARE

The United States Supreme Court said it best in Berger v. United States. The Prosecutor is "the servant of the law, the twofold aim of which is that guilt shall not escape or innocence suffer." Our duty will always be to seek justice for all.

The District Attorney is a locally elected official responsible for representing the people of the State of Alabama in the prosecution of criminal cases and various civil actions. The Lee County District Attorney's Office works closely with the Auburn Police Department, the Opelika Police Department, the Lee County Sheriff's Office, and state law enforcement agencies working within Lee County.

All felony charges are handled through the District Attorney's office. This also includes misdemeanor offenses that occurred during the commission of a felony offense. The District Attorney's Office is also responsible for all misdemeanor and traffic offenses committed in the county. Stand-alone misdemeanors and traffic offenses occurring within the city limits of Auburn or Opelika are handled through the city's municipal court. Additionally, our office oversees the prosecution of Juvenile offenders and Child Support Enforcement. The District Attorney will also appear before the Board of Pardons and Parole to object to parole when appropriate.

Curious about the difference between felonies and misdemeanors? See our "Criminal Law 101" diagram below.



Prosecution Team:

Jessica Ventiere, District Attorney
Clay Thomas, Chief Assistant District Attorney
Cathey Berardi, Senior Trial Assistant District Attorney
Garrett Saucer, Senior Trial Assistant District Attorney
Margaret Mayfield, Child Support Assistant District Attorney
Madison Grantham, Assistant District Attorney
Kacey Cooper, Assistant District Attorney
Luke Farmer, Assistant District Attorney
Marsá Aston, Assistant District Attorney

Trial Litigation Team:

Alex Wood
Evette Daniels
Cecilia Smoak
Kristen Mayes

Investigations:

David Lane, Chief Investigator

Operations Team:

Jeanette Hart, Office Manager
Becky Mobley, Operations Assistant

Pretrial Diversion:

Kambree Thomas, Coordinator

Restitution Recovery:

Ebony Askew, Coordinator

Child Support:

Shannon Franklin, Coordinator
Shirley Frost
Dana Crowe
Lindsay Tamarkin
Briana Martinez

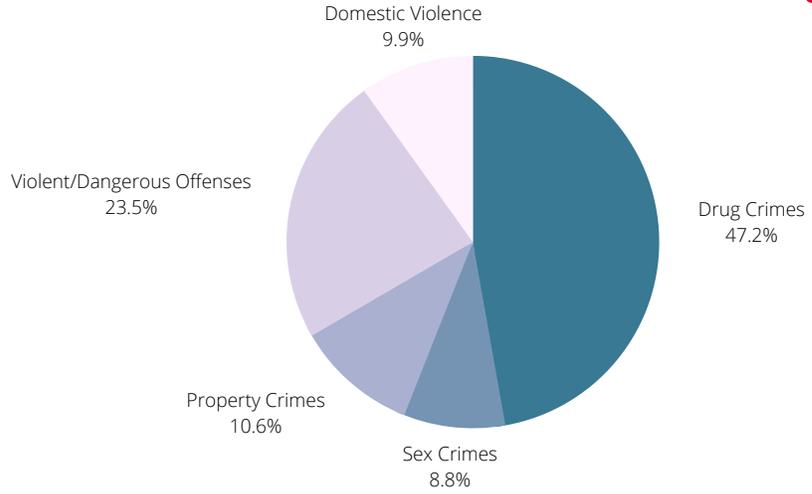
Helping Families Initiative:

LeKeisha Presley, Director
Amanda Amat, Assistant Director

Canine Companions:

Josette
Logan
Chunk, Retired

2022 Crime Trends* By The Numbers



- 4066 criminal charges filed in 2022*
- 470-Average case load per Circuit Court prosecutor
- 22 weeks of criminal jury terms.
- 22 cases tried to verdict
- An average of 3-4 days to try one case.
- Majority of cases are resolved through plea agreements.

Crime Trends: Approximately 4066 criminal charges were filed in Lee County in 2022. The numbers and percentages reflected are based on criminal charges rather than defendants. One defendant may have multiple charges.

*For the purposes of this chart the categories will have the following definitions:

- Domestic Violence: all domestic or family related offenses.
- Drug Crimes: all drug related offenses, including paraphernalia.
- Sex Crimes: all sexually motivated offenses.
- Property Crime: all crimes dealing with the loss of personal or real property.
- Violent/Dangerous Offenses: all homicides and any other crime dangerous to the health of another person such as assault, robbery, and attempted murders.



HFI Mission

The Helping Families Initiative works to assist children and their families by identifying and connecting them to the resources necessary to improve their child’s academic success, emotional well-being, and family stability. Through improvements in these specific areas, HFI seeks to decrease the child’s risk of substance abuse, suspensions, juvenile arrests, and student dropouts.

HFI Goal

The Helping Families Initiative (HFI) is built on a collaborative relationship between the Lee County District Attorney’s Office, community partners, and the surrounding public school systems. HFI seeks to provide prevention and intervention services aimed at eliminating the barriers to the child’s emotional, behavioral, and academic success by creating a network of support and referrals to each child and family participating in the Helping Families Initiative.

HFI Referral Process

Families may complete a referral form on our website or by contacting the Lee County District Attorney’s Office at (334)737-3446. Schools may also make referrals. Following a referral, the family will be contacted and offered HFI services.

LEE COUNTY HELPING FAMILIES INITIATIVE

LEE COUNTY SCHOOLS, OPELIKA CITY SCHOOLS, & AUBURN CITY SCHOOLS



240

Total Referrals

166

Attendance Referrals

74

Behavior Referrals

134

Community Presentations

5,851

Total Attendance

67

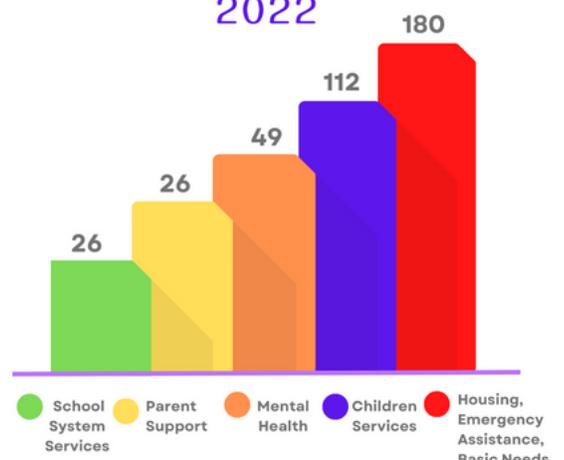
Interagency Meetings

431

Total Attendance

Lee County HFI COMMUNITY REFERRALS

2022



Some children may require multiple services.

Child Support

The Lee County District Attorney's Child Support Unit acts as the legal counsel for the Lee County Department of Human Resources in court actions for paternity establishment and enforcement of child support orders.

The office only handles cases where the Lee County Department of Human Resources is a party and have been referred to the District Attorney's Office.

For information on how to receive child support services visit our website at www.leecountyda.org.

FY21-22 Collections: \$10,863,098.00
Caseload Count: 5500

Internships

Our internship program offers an insider's view of the criminal justice system. We have intern opportunities for high school juniors and seniors, college students, and law students.

While interning in our office, students will rotate through the different departments, observe court proceedings, learn about the legal system, and develop basic business skills.

Students interested in an internship can email our office at info@leecountyda.org.

District Court

The District Court is a court of limited jurisdiction. All misdemeanors and traffic offenses that occur in Lee County are prosecuted by the District Attorney's Office in the District Court.*

The cases are presented and argued before one of the two District Court Judges in Lee County. The District Court Judge determines all issues of law and fact. Sentences cannot exceed one year.

Cases prosecuted in District Court range from minor offenses, such as seatbelt violations or speeding to more serious misdemeanors, including Fleeing from Law Enforcement, Domestic Violence, and Driving Under the Influence.

2022 District Court Numbers

- 329 General Misdemeanors. This includes offenses such as Attempting to Elude, Theft, Resisting Arrest, Disorderly Conduct, Cruelty to Animals, Harassment, and Criminal Trespass.
- 87 Domestic Violence Offenses.
- 69 Drug Offenses.
- 393 Minors in Possession.
- 258 Worthless Checks.
- 128 Driving Under the Influence.
- 9404 Traffic Citations.

*Excluding misdemeanor and traffic offenses which occur in the city limits of Auburn and Opelika.



PRE-TRIAL DIVERSION

Our Pre-Trial Diversion (PTD) Program continues to work with nonviolent defendants, who have no prior criminal history, by diverting them from the traditional court system into an individualized and supervised restorative program.

Only those who are eligible and committed to successfully completing the program will be considered. Individuals in the program are required to work, further educational training, perform community service, participate in counseling, report to the PTD Office, pay restitution if applicable, and any other efforts that will further their rehabilitation.

All individuals who enter the PTD Program with a DUI are required to have an ignition interlock alcohol monitoring device installed in their vehicle or they will lose their driver's license during the duration of their time in the program. All individuals with a DUI keep the device installed in their vehicle for a minimum of six months.

PTD 2022

- 218 Individuals were accepted into PTD.
- 89% successful completion rate.
- 8,087 hours of community service were completed.



WORTHLESS CHECK UNIT

The Worthless Check Unit (WCU) was formed to collect restitution for victims of worthless checks. The unit assists businesses and individuals who receive insufficient funds and account-closed checks.

The Worthless Check Unit is a self-funded service of the District Attorney's Office. There is no charge to victims to use our service. When the bad check writer fails to pay through our office, we assist with the prosecution.

2022 WCU Collections

- \$10,345 was collected and returned to various businesses and victims.



RESTITUTION RECOVERY

Our Restitution Recovery Unit monitors, tracks, and collects delinquent restitution and court costs owed in criminal cases. The Restitution Recovery Program enforces the court's order with several different methods including restitution dockets, contempt hearings, and restitution agreements.

Currently, there are over 2,000 individuals that have cases turned over to our Restitution Recovery Program for collection. Individuals may perform community service to satisfy court costs and fees; however, victims must be reimbursed monetarily for their loss.

2022 Restitution Recovery

- Collected \$280,096.00

GRAND JURY

To meet the needs of our growing community, we increased the number of Grand Jury terms from 4 weeks per year to 8 weeks per year. Grand Juries were convened in January (cancelled due to COVID), April, August, October, November, and December. Two Thousand Eight Hundred Twenty-Six (2,826) cases were presented to Grand Juries in 2022. That is an average of 400 cases per Grand Jury term.

RAPID RESOLUTION

In 2021, our office along with our Clerk's Office, Court Administration, and Judges developed a new docket, the Rapid Resolution Docket (RRD). The RRD is a plea docket for individuals who want to plead guilty to their charges prior to being indicted by a Grand Jury. The goal of the RRD is to reduce the number of cases being presented to a Grand Jury. By doing so, the RRD saves the time of Grand Jurors, conserves valuable prosecutorial and judicial resources, and allows our prosecutors and the court to concentrate on other cases which will proceed to trial.

RRD 2022

- 129 individuals pled guilty through Rapid Resolution.
- 349 cases were resolved through Rapid Resolution.

GUN PRESENT

In 2022, we saw an increase in gun violence. Many, if not most, of these shootings can be tied to narcotics and gang activity. Time and again, we see low-level crimes escalate simply because a criminal has a gun. Firearms in combination with a criminal mindset are a real and present threat to the well-being of every member of our community. As a result, our office will recommend mandatory jail time wherever a gun is present during the commission of a crime.

CANINE COMPANIONS

Josette (“Jo”) has been working full time in the criminal justice system since May 10, 2019, when she graduated with her handler as a certified facility dog from Canine Companions. Canine Companions trained Jo in over 40 commands that she uses to serve crime survivors and witnesses as they navigate the judicial process. Prior to being placed as a certified facility dog, Jo was required to pass a public access test with her handler demonstrating that she has the appropriate temperament and demeanor to work in a public setting. Jo is required to recertify with her handler periodically. Jo’s primary duty is to reduce the stress of crime survivors and witnesses when they testify in criminal proceedings, thereby enhancing the ability of the court to obtain full and accurate testimony. She does this by lying quietly and unseen at the witness’s feet while he or she testifies. Jo also serves survivors and witnesses outside the courtroom by attending meetings with them and waiting with them prior to and after testimony. When not in the courtroom, Jo is able to use her skills to engage with survivors and witnesses by playing games, reading books, and taking walks. When Jo is not working, she loves to chase the ball and have her teeth brushed.



*"Dogs have a way of finding the people who need them, filling an emptiness we don't even know we have."
-- Thom Jones*



Josette

Logan

Logan is a facility dog that works alongside The Helping Families Initiative team at the Lee County District Attorney’s Office. Logan is a five-year-old Labrador Retriever who is always available to lend a paw to the children in our community. Logan was specifically bred and trained by Canine Companions, a certified assistance dog organization that is a member of Assistance Dogs International. Many of the children who are referred to the Helping Families Initiative have commonly experienced trauma, mental health diagnoses, learning disabilities, poverty, abuse, and other problematic behaviors that are preventing them from attending school or behaving in school properly. Logan uses his knowledge of over forty commands to specialize in assisting children by providing reassurance during times of stress or trauma, motivation to reduce negative behaviors, and inspiration to achieve their academic and social emotional goals. As a facility dog Logan provides unconditional love and a feeling of security. Logan assists in being a key resource to children as they begin the preventative services through The Helping Families Initiative in hopes of ultimately reducing the number of children at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

2022 DA INITIATIVES

Victims' Assistance Fund



- Established in 2021, the Victims' Assistance Fund helps victim service organizations and individuals meet needs that arise as a result of a crime. These funds are provided through public donations.

Second Chance Job Fair



- In 2022, the DA's office hosted its annual Second Chance Job Fair at the Opelika Library. The goal is to help match employers and resources with people who have past criminal histories and who are committed to bettering their lives and the lives of their families. 25 local businesses and providers participated. 30% of job seekers became employed following the job fair.

VICTIM SERVICES

Every case is important, and our office strives to make contact with crime victims as soon as possible. To that end, letters with general information and our contact information are sent within 30 days of the criminal event.

Additionally, we want to equip victims and survivors with the tools they need to recover by providing a victim's resource guide, answering questions about the criminal justice system, and helping them every step of the way.

In 2022, our Victim Service Officers helped victims and survivors recover \$15,018.66 in benefits from Alabama Crime Victims' Compensation. These monies are paid to the victims to help cover medical bills and funeral expenses.



2022 Notable Cases

SENTENCING IN ALABAMA

Alabama's Sentencing Standards consist of worksheets, instructions, and sentence length tables. The sentence length tables are based on a formula, which takes into account certain aggravating factors, such as prior felony convictions and the severity of the crime. Based on this formula, a range of punishment is developed.

According to the Alabama Sentencing Commission's 2022 Annual Report, 83% of individuals incarcerated in the Department of Corrections are classified as violent offenders.

For more information on Alabama's sentencing structure and prison population visit www.sentencingcommission.alacourt.gov.

FEBRUARY 2022

State of Alabama v. Cody Waller: Convicted of Burglary 2nd Degree (sentenced to 15 years) and Sexual Abuse 1st Degree (Sentenced to 10 years split to serve 1 year).

State of Alabama v. Alexander Thammavong: Convicted of Trafficking in Methamphetamine (sentenced to Life due to prior felony convictions).

MARCH 2022

State of Alabama v. Marcellous Stewart: Convicted of Failing to Register as a Sex Offender (sentenced to 25 years).

State of Alabama v. Hugh Martin: Convicted of Rape 1st Degree (sentenced to 19 years), Sexual Abuse 1st Degree (Sentenced to 10 years), Sodomy 1st Degree (Sentenced to 19 years), and two counts of Domestic Violence (Sentenced to one year).



2022 Notable Cases

APRIL 2022

State of Alabama v. Richard Derrill Ennis: Convicted of the 2006 Capital murder of Lori Ann Slesinski. Sentenced to Life in Prison Without the Possibility of Parole.

State of Alabama v. Rodrecius Ford: Convicted of two counts of Rape 1st Degree (sentenced to 20 years), two counts of Sexual Assault of a Child Less Than 12 (sentenced to 10 years), convicted of two counts of Sodomy 1st Degree (sentenced to 20 years).

MAY 2022

State of Alabama v. Trevor Cofer: Convicted of four counts of Voyeurism 1st Degree (sentenced to 9 years).

State of Alabama v. Ross McFarland: Pled guilty to Murder (sentenced to 50 years).

State of Alabama v. Cordarius Wright: Convicted of Robbery 1st Degree (sentenced to Life).

AUGUST 2022

State of Alabama v. Justin Upshaw: Convicted of Attempted Murder (sentenced to 50 years) and three counts of Shooting into Occupied Vehicles (sentenced to 20 years)

State of Alabama v. Austin Hamby: Convicted of two counts of Rape 1st degree, Production of Obscene Material, and Dissemination of Obscene Material. (sentenced to 21.25 years for Rape and Production and 10 years for Dissemination to run consecutive).

State of Alabama v. Danny Hamm: Convicted of Chemical Endangerment of a Child (sentenced to 12 years), Unlawful Possession of a Controlled Substance, and Possession of Drug Paraphernalia (sentenced to one year).

State of Alabama v. Kenneth Thrower: Convicted of Trafficking in Methamphetamine (sentenced to Life due to prior felony convictions).



2022 Notable Cases

SEPTEMBER 2022

State of Alabama v. Donnie Donnell Miles: Convicted of Murder (sentenced to 45 years).

State of Alabama v. Frederick Ashmore: Pled guilty to Arson 1st degree, Domestic Violence 1st degree, and three counts of attempted murder (sentenced to Life in prison).

OCTOBER 2022

State of Alabama v. Ricco Maddox: Pled guilty to Robbery 1st degree and Assault 2nd Degree. (sentenced to Life for robbery and 20 years for assault 2nd).

NOVEMBER 2022

State of Alabama v. Nyesha Brownlee: Convicted of Assault 2nd Degree (sentenced to 5 years split to serve 2 years).

DECEMBER 2022

State of Alabama v. William Scott Wilson: Convicted of two counts of Sodomy 1st Degree (sentenced to 25 years).

AWARDS

Lee County District Attorney, Jessica Ventiere, received national recognition from the Association of Government Attorneys in Capital Litigation (AGACL) for outstanding work in capital litigation and complex homicide prosecution.

DA Ventiere was nominated, in part to the no-body, cold case prosecution of Richard "Rick" Ennis for the murder of 24-year-old Lori Ann Slesinski, who vanished from her home in Auburn, Alabama in 2006. Lori's body has never been recovered. In April 2022, Ennis was convicted by a Lee County jury of two counts of capital murder and sentenced to Life Without the Possibility of Parole.

COMMUNITY

District Attorney employees actively give back to the community by volunteering their personal time to various organizations and programs. In 2022, DA staff volunteered and supported the following organizations and programs: United Way of Lee County • Opelika Chamber 20 Under 40 • Youth Baseball • Youth Soccer • Sunday school leadership • Auburn Ambassadors • Youth mentoring • Church Youth Group Leaders • Very Merry Stroll.

As an office, we want to highlight and support local nonprofits whose work positively impacts public safety and community wellbeing. These nonprofits address the needs of at-risk youth, food insecurity, education and literacy, child victims, and so much more. Additionally, we want to show our support by participating in community events that promote law enforcement and public safety.

