

Doorley discusses reshaping DA's office

By Denise M. Champagne

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Sandra Doorley, Monroe County District Attorney, speaks to the League of Women Voters during the group's annual meeting at the Locust Hill Country Club on Thursday,

Lots of changes have been taking place in the Monroe County District Attorney's Office since Sandra Doorley took over the helm in January.

The county's first woman district attorney Wednesday told members of the League of Women Voters for the Rochester Metropolitan Area about those changes, which include reorganizing the staff and bureaus and hiring more women.

Doorley's office has a staff of 134 people, including 79 attorneys. She said she has made offers on two of five vacancies and is looking for three more assistant district attorneys. Five assistants were let go shortly before she took office.

"Our role is to seek justice, serve the community and protect victims of crime," Doorley said, explaining the roles of the various bureaus, which are divided into crime specialties.

She acknowledged her first assistant, Kelly C. Wolford, and noted another first for the office – having a woman in the top two spots.

Doorley said she has hired more women than men, which was not intentional; it just worked out that way in her search for the best and brightest. She said the office is now even in terms of the number of men and women attorneys.

"What I really wanted to do was bring the DA's office into the 21st century because times have changed," Doorley said.

She mentioned Eastman Kodak Co. and how tough economic times are impacting crime, prompting the creation of the Economic Crime Bureau, staffed by three attorneys, handling matters such as non-payment of taxes or embezzling money from employers. They also investigate and prosecute identity theft and all felony fraud cases.

Doorley also combined the drug and gun bureaus, since they go hand in hand in many cases, and split up the domestic violence/child abuse bureau. In its place, she has created the Special Victims Trial Division with subdivisions to separately focus on child abuse, sex crimes, domestic violence and elder abuse. The division is housed on one floor with 15 attorneys specifically dedicated to prosecute those crime types and help victims.

Doorley said when she took over, she met with all of the attorneys and tried to place them in the areas they preferred, noting people need to be passionate about what they are prosecuting to bring about justice.

Doorley said she is also working with the county to get another floor of the Watts Building, where the district attorney's office is housed, to set up a victim-friendly environment to protect victims while prosecuting their offenders.

The Monroe County District Attorney's Office, Doorley said, operates on a \$14 million budget, most of which comes from the county, some from grants to fund specific programs. She said she also has a forfeiture fund with a \$100,000 budget, derived from illegal activity, which helps fund assistant district attorney training and a witness relocation program to help move witnesses to other parts of the county, away from threats.

Doorley said Monroe is definitely a "no-snitch" county and she has numerous cases where witnesses are afraid to come forward.

Some of the forfeiture fund also supports the Boys & Girls Clubs of Rochester, continuing the dedication of her predecessor, Michael C. Green. She said the club programs help protect youth and get them on the right path so they do not end up in her office being prosecuted.

Of 77,000 documented cases of child abuse in New York state in 2010 (2,000 in Monroe County), Doorley noted that more than 3,000 of the victims will go on to become violent felony offenders, something programs like Fight Crime: Invest in Kids are helping to curtail.

Doorley said the district attorney's office prosecuted 25,000 to 30,000 criminal cases last year, of which 5,462 were felonies, a figure consistent with previous years. She said the office also had a 95 percent conviction rate, which she credited to "every member," and a trial conviction rate of 75 percent.

One statistic Doorley said she finds startling is the number of felony driving while intoxicated cases: 987 in 2011. A felony DWI charge is placed against someone convicted of a misdemeanor count of DWI within the previous 10 years.

"The number of repeat DWIs is skyrocketing," said Doorley, who was chief of the DWI Bureau in 2004-05. "The alcohol-related crashes I saw were horrendous. Our goal is not only to punish those who are repeat offenders, but to get them treatment."

She said sometimes prosecution is the push needed to get problem drinkers into treatment.

Doorley said the role of the district attorney's office is to be free and independent of outside influence, holding all crime breakers equally accountable, regardless of who they are.

"The law simply applies to everyone equally," she said. "People need to be treated equally, whether they live in the city or in the suburbs."

She also acknowledged public defenders as providing zealous representation for their clients.

"It's not about convictions, but making sure justice gets served," she added.

Doorley also said she stood with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Lt. Gov. Robert J. Duffy this year in supporting expansion of the state's DNA databank to help find offenders and exonerate the innocent.

"DNA has been the best tool, the best friend of a DA," she said, noting she has worked on cold cases in her 20 years with the district attorney's office. "There's not a prosecutor ever that wants to convict the wrong person."

During a question period, someone asked about the time it takes to get DNA results and if it impacts speedy trial rights.

"Darn that CSI," Doorley joked, referring to the popular television show on crime scene investigations, depicting almost immediate turnaround times.

She said the quickest she has been able to get results, at times begging, is 48 hours and that it does not happen often.

"Sometimes good things are worth waiting for," Doorley said, noting she has often had to ask for a continuance in court, but that the defense usually wants the DNA results, too, and does not object.

Doorley spoke at the league's annual meeting, hosted at the Locust Hill Country Club in Pittsford. She was introduced by Beth Keigher, a board member and head of the Local Government Committee, who announced Doorley had been made an honorary league member.

The meeting was opened by chapter President Katherine Smith who presided over the later business session.

— Photos by Vasiliy Baziuk



Sarah Liebschultz, a 53-year member of the League of Women Voters, poses a question to Doorley during the league's annual meeting.



John Schmitt has a laugh during the League of Women Voters annual meeting.



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