SAFE Event Puts Spotlight on Senior Financial Abuse

In 2020, an 84-year-old local woman met a stranger on an online dating site who showered her with affection and attention.

Smitten by the person on the other end of the computer – who convinced her that he is being held in Kenya for a tax evasion issue and needed thousands of dollars to fight the case – she begins sending him money.

When all said and done, the woman sent her online boyfriend close to $1.8 million before her loved ones grew suspicious and reported a possible scam to police.

The man she came to know as her boyfriend turned out to be a scam artist who befriends senior citizens, enters romantic relationships with

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

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Anyone who has been paying attention to recent headlines knows that it’s been a startling and highly emotional time for our community.

The murders of 19-year-old Aileen Villaseñor, a new mother, and 17-year-old Sasha Mufich, a Valley Oak High School student set to graduate in June, capped off a series of violent and disturbing incidents in Napa County including the murder of 30-year-old Omari Elijah Lyles, a brazen gas station shootout, and allegations of child molestation against former American Canyon High School coach Brad Rowell.

When crimes like these occur in Napa County, it shocks us. It breaks the train of thought that crimes like these don’t happen in Napa.

But they do – and it can be devastating for the whole community.

When speaking to victims’ families and friends, I encourage them to allow time to grieve, to take care of themselves physically and mentally, and to reach out for assistance from our Victims Services Division and other local agencies that stand ready to help.

On top of the already complex emotions most of them experience, many of them also feel it’s their duty to bring justice for their loved ones.

But this is a burden that doesn’t fall upon them, nor should it.

As prosecutors, it is our job to guide cases through the criminal justice system, no matter the size, and it’s a job that we take very seriously.

The court process can be confusing, lengthy, full of delays, twists and turns, but we chose this profession because of our deep commitment to our community’s safety and to justice.
IN THE COMMUNITY

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them, and coerces money from them.

While the name of the victim described in the above scenario is being withheld to protect her privacy, her situation is an actual case handled by the Napa County District Attorney’s Office and is one of the many reasons why the Napa DA’s Office has teamed up with Napa County Health and Human Services Agency and Molly’s Angels to host the county’s first Seniors Against Financial Abuse (S.A.F.E) workshop designed to curb the financial exploitation of senior citizens and provide seniors and financial professionals alike tools they can use to recognize scams and keep safe.

“The vast majority of seniors are able to protect themselves and plan for their own financial future,” Napa County District Attorney Allison Haley said, “and in order to assist them in making sound decisions, we need to raise awareness to seniors and their families that scams are becoming more and more commonplace.”

The workshop will take place on Friday June 28 at the St. Helena Performing Arts Center, 1401 Grayson Avenue, St. Helena. The first half of the day 9 a.m. to noon, will be dedicated to senior citizens and will focus on common scams, how to spot them, and what do to if they feel they are being targeted.

The afternoon session, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., is designed for financial professionals to learn about scams with the goal of creating a network of scam-savvy financial experts in Napa County who can help senior citizens that they encounter and watch out for them.

Financial experts are encouraged to RSVP for their portion of the workshop by visiting the event’s online RSVP page.
INSIDE THE DA’S OFFICE

Mental Health Services Aim to Decrease Jury, Court Staff Post Secondary Trauma from Criminal Cases

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

On any given day, the Napa County District Attorney's Office prosecutes numerous cases ranging from misdemeanors to more serious violations of the law. The facts of these cases often surface in the courtroom and while anyone from the public may attend a criminal trial, none review the often-copious amounts of evidence provided to jury members.

It’s a daunting responsibility for juries and one that often leads to secondary trauma.

According to the Napa County Superior Court’s Executive Officer Bob Fleshman, juries frequently experience secondary trauma on cases involving children molestation, sexual abuse, or worse. It’s due to this emotional toll that is often levied against people who serve on juries that the Napa County Superior Court and the Napa County Health and Human Services Agency team up to provide mental health services for jury members and court staff alike.

“The jury service is one of the highest forms of flattery in terms of civil service, it is something that considerably impacts folks’ lives in terms of disruption,” Fleshman said. “If you are in a high-impact trial, knowing that you were on a jury is the honor part of it, but I think it’s also our obligation to take care of our jurors. For these really visceral events, being able to provide a soft landing or at least letting them know that the court cares is one of the more important things about it.”

The services are offered immediately after a verdict is read, Fleshman said.

“When we know that a verdict is imminent or near, we give HHSA a heads up so they can have someone ready,” he said. “We have them here to offer that service.”

Napa County Health and Human Services Agency’s Behavioral Health Manager Chelsea Stoner explains her staff of 20 therapists is trained in Critical Incident Stress Management and stand ready to provide services to the courts and others in Napa County who need it.

“It is a multi-faceted array of crisis intervention debriefings that can be made available to people who have experienced trauma or postsecondary trauma to help mitigate the effects of what they have heard or what they have seen to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health symptoms,” she said, adding that Critical Incident Stress Management is not therapy, per se, but allows HHSA therapists to assess for needed mental health resources, which can be provided directly or through referrals.

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Photos by: Lauren Weitz
“It offers folks the opportunity to express emotions, to vent how they are feeling either individually or with peers who have gone through the same experience that they have,” she said. “It allows them to learn from the therapist what are typical stress responses, what are atypical stress responses, when to get help, when you are doing OK, and when what’s going on is normal.”

The Behavioral Health Division provides one-on-one debriefings and critical incident stress debriefings to larger groups as part of their service to the county.

Aside from the courtroom, the Behavioral Health Division provides these free services to fellow Napa County Departments and other workplaces, schools and community groups who request them. Asked what defines a critical incident, Stoner said “any situation that somebody could have a trauma effect from. So common things are school shootings, community disasters, or jury debriefings, anytime somebody has accumulated enough information that would impact them, whether as a group or as an individual.”

As for the benefits of Critical Incident Stress Management, Stoner said, “The Behavioral Health Division is here to serve the community, to get folks healthy and keep them healthy. Folks can express emotions, process emotions and get some psychoeducation while we are able to link to resources to help with long-term rehabilitation after a traumatic event, and I think that promotes a healthy community.”
Out & About

IN THE COMMUNITY

Town hall @ American Canyon High School
4/18/2024

Napa County Management Academy
4/4/2024

Human Trafficking Presentation @ Camille Creek
4/19/2024

Get Vocal for Victims Annual Fundraiser
4/18/2024

Photo credits: Carlos Villatoro, Amy Bailey and Taryn Hunter
People V. John Nicholson, Judith Adolph and Jessica Whitten

John Richard Wesley, age 22, of Vallejo, and Jessica Whitten, age 19, of Santa Rosa are charged with murder in connection with the shooting deaths of 19-year-old Aileen Villaseñor and 17-year-old Sasha Mufich, both of Napa.

In addition to the above-mentioned charges, Wesley and Whitten are charged with the special circumstance of multiple murder. Wesley is additionally charged with the special allegations of personal and intentional discharge of a firearm causing death. It is further alleged that Wesley’s crimes involved great bodily harm and a high degree of cruelty, viciousness, and callousness; that the crimes were carried out with planning, sophistication, and professionalism; and that the defendant engaged in violent conduct that indicates a significant danger to society.

Whitten is additionally charged with the special allegation of armed with a firearm and crime of accessory after the fact. A third defendant, Judith Adolph, 19 of Santa Rosa, is charged with assault with a semiautomatic firearm and accessory after the fact. All three defendants are being held at the Napa County Department of Corrections without bail.

Nicholson, Adolph, and Whitten are due in court on May 7, 2024, at 8:30 a.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court. Deputy District Attorney Agnes Dziadur is prosecuting the case against the three defendants, with assistance from DA Investigator Nick Conrad and Victim Services Coordinator Alejandra Mendieta-Bedolla.

People V. Brad Matthew Rowell

Brad Matthew Rowell, age 41, is charged with 21 felony counts including lewd act upon a child, unlawful sexual intercourse, oral copulation of a person under 18, and possession of matter depicting minor engaging in sexual conduct.

The defendant, who was the track and field coach at American Canyon High School, is also charged with the special allegation of vulnerable victim and position of trust. Mr. Rowell is alleged to have committed the above-mentioned crimes against a student at the high school.
People V. Christian Evans and Michael Anthony Davis

Christian Evans, age 18, of Vallejo is charged with attempted murder; assault by machine gun or assault weapon; assault with a firearm; assault by means to produce great bodily injury; discharge of a firearm with gross negligence; unlawful firearm activity; possession of firearm - not registered owner; carrying a loaded firearm - not registered owner; and possession or transport of a machine gun.

The defendant is additionally charged with the special allegations of personal and intentional discharge of a firearm; personal use of a firearm; use of a special weapon; violence cruelty, viciousness or callousness; violent conduct; increasing seriousness of priors/sustained petitions; and probation or parole violation.

It is alleged that the defendant was involved in a shootout that took place in the afternoon of April 1, 2024, at a Safeway gas station in American Canyon. A second suspect in this case, Michael Anthony Davis, age 18, of Vallejo, is charged with assault by means to produce great bodily injury and the special allegations of violence, cruelty, viciousness or callousness; violent conduct; increasing seriousness of priors/sustained petitions; and probation or parole violation. A third juvenile suspect was also arrested in connection with the shootout.

Evans is due in court on May 7, 2024, at 8:30 a.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court for a plea/setting hearing. Napa County Deputy District Attorney Kristen Orlando is prosecuting the case against Mr. Evans and Mr. Davis on behalf of the People, with assistance from DA Investigator Joe Perry.

People V. Diego Montano Puga

A Napa jury convicted Diego Montano Puga, age 20, of Guerneville, of driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) and driving while having a .08 percent or higher blood alcohol content level.

The jury also found true the special allegation of driving recklessly during the commission of a DUI. On September 9, 2023, at approximately 11 p.m., a St. Helena Police officer observed the defendant drive south along Highway 29 at Deer Park Road at 95 miles per hour in a 45 miles per hour zone.

The officer observed the defendant veer his silver Infinity into the Deer Park Road turn lane, but continue south along Highway 29, crossing a double yellow line and veering into northbound traffic along Highway 29 to pass a car. A subsequent DUI investigation conducted by the officer determined that Mr. Puga was DUI.

The defendant was sentenced to three years’ probation with terms and conditions, 60 days in jail, and ordered to pay the fine amount of $1,563 and a restitution amount of $150.

Mr. Puga was ordered to remand into the Napa County Department of Corrections on May 7, 2024, at 8 a.m. The case against the defendant was prosecuted by Deputy District Attorney Erik Lawrence.
Napa County District Attorney

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