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Napa County District Attorney’s Office Launches Speaker’s Bureau

The District Attorney’s Speaker’s Bureau features several subject matter experts who are available to provide presentations in the community. Photo: John Lipanovich

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media officer

The Napa County District Attorney’s Office has officially launched its Speaker’s Bureau with a new webpage and a new way for the public to request a presentation from one of our several subject matter experts.

The mission of the District Attorney’s Office is to keep the community safe, advocate for victims, and hold criminals accountable for their crimes. One

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It’s a bittersweet season for the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as we prepare to say goodbye to two distinguished members of our Investigations Unit.

In late June, our office bid farewell to District Attorney Investigator Joe Dulworth, a veteran law enforcement professional who has more than 27 years of service to the community. Joe was assigned to the Napa County Special Investigations Bureau and has been instrumental in helping the District Attorney’s Office in building cases against some of Napa County’s most notorious offenders.

Joe has handled every situation with integrity, courage, and compassion and has earned the respect and admiration of everyone at the Napa County District Attorney’s Office.

In August, we will lose another cherished member of the office to retirement in Leslie Pate, our Chief of Investigations. Leslie has been a cornerstone of our office and has steered us through some challenging cases and times. Her contributions to our office would take an entire edition of Newsline, and it goes without saying that we will miss her greatly.

As Joe and Leslie embark on their well-deserved retirement, I would like to personally extend my heartfelt gratitude for their years of dedicated service to the people of Napa County.

They have both touched countless lives and the positive impact they have made will be remembered for years to come.

On behalf of our office, we wish you a retirement filled with joy, relaxation, and the satisfaction of knowing that your legacy of service and professionalism will continue to inspire future generations. Thank you for making our community a safer place.
INSIDE THE DA’S OFFICE

Chief of Investigations Leslie Pate Retires After Decades of Law Enforcement Service

By Carlos Villatoro
Public Affairs and Media Officer

The Napa County District Attorney’s Office bids farewell to its Chief of Investigations Leslie Pate after a 24-year career in law enforcement.

Leslie began her career with the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Office and was later hired as an Investigator at the Napa County District Attorney’s Office in 2008. She served as an Investigator for many years, was promoted to Lieutenant in 2019, and in 2021, promoted to Chief Investigator.

Throughout her tenure, Chief Investigator Pate exemplified the highest standards of leadership, integrity, and unwavering commitment to the District Attorney’s Office, the community, and the pursuit of justice. Her tireless dedication went above and beyond her regular duties and left an indelible mark on our department and our hearts.

“It has been a true pleasure watching Leslie evolve from a brand-new investigator to an expert in gang prosecutions, cold case homicides, operations Lieutenant and ultimately Chief – leading our Investigations Unit.” Napa County Assistant District Attorney Paul Gero said. “Her determination, vision and leadership raised the bar for our investigators, and this will have a lasting impact on our law enforcement community.”

As she embarks on this new chapter in her life, we extend our deepest gratitude for her steadfast leadership, commitment, and dedication. Although she will be greatly missed her impact will continue to resonate within our department and community for years to come.
of the ways that we accomplish this mission is to engage the community through speaking events.

The Speaker’s Bureau features 17 subject matter experts who the public can request to visit their school, group, agency or service group to provide presentations in their respective fields of expertise.

“As District Attorney, I am proud to announce the launch of our Speaker’s Bureau,” DA Haley said. “By bringing together subject matter experts from diverse fields, we are strengthening our commitment to education, prevention, and community engagement. This initiative is not just about addressing crime; it’s about empowering our community with the knowledge and resources needed to build a safer and more resilient future for everyone.”

To coincide with the launch of its Speaker’s Bureau, the Napa County District Attorney’s Office created a webpage that the public can use to get to know the subject matter experts and developed a speaker request form that can be used to book a presentation.

“Our hope is that the community will call upon our subject matter experts to gain some insight into how our office prosecutes criminal cases, supports victims, and builds relationships within our county,” DA Haley said.
Victim Services programs throughout the state and locally are breathing a sigh of relief after the approval of necessary funds that will allow them to continue providing critical services to victims of crime in the state. The approval of $103 million included in the approved state budget will fund victim services programs until the next budgetary cycle.

News of the allotted budgetary funds comes at the heels of cuts to the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) that provided necessary funds for local agencies to deliver vital services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in California. In May, it was announced that these funds would take a 44.7 percent reduction, which placed many programs in the state in the precarious situation of having to reduce services or shut their door entirely.

The recent announcement of a one-time allotment of $103 million is in response to a push by victim advocates throughout the state who launched a campaign to keep victim services funding going.

In the latest episode of the Sidebar Podcast, I spoke with one of them in Tracy Lamb, the executive director of NEWS - Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Services, who was joined by Erin Harper, the Napa County District Attorney’s Victim Witness Program Manager. The duo spoke about the local impact of reduced victim services funding.

Listen to the podcast on our YouTube channel and don’t forget to subscribe to the channel to ensure that you don’t miss any of the Napa County District Attorney’s uploads.
DA Staff Updates

Cameron Lucky, Summer Law Clerk

Cameron Lucky joined the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as a 2L Summer Law Clerk in late May. Cameron is a graduate of the University of San Diego, where she obtained her undergraduate degree and will be entering her third year at UC Davis School of Law in the fall.

Cameron comes from a family of prosecutors and made the decision to pursue a career in criminal law at the age of 14. From an early age, her prosecutor parents provided her insight into the world of criminal justice.

“As I was growing up, my parents always said that the best part of their job was doing the right thing for the right reasons,” she said. “When deciding what kind of career I wanted to pursue, this line always came back to me. I hope that through my work, I can continue to do the right thing for the right reasons and pursue justice for those in my community.”

Tia Bentivegna, Summer Law Clerk

Tia Bentivegna joined the Napa County District Attorney’s Office as a 2L Summer Law Clerk in late May. She just completed her second year at the University of San Francisco School of Law.

Born and raised in Petaluma and a Bay Area Native, Tia spent her 1L summer interning at the San Francisco District Attorney’s Office, as a 1L Law Clerk, and wanted to work closer to her hometown and learn about a smaller county while getting hands-on written and trial experience.

As an undergrad, Tia studied Business Administration on the Central Coast at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, but always wanted to pursue law. Tia comes from a family and close friend circle of law enforcement members and found a passion for criminal law, especially when she took Criminal Law, Criminal Procedure, Evidence, and Criminal Trial Practice classes in her first two years of law school.

Tia competed with her friend, classmate, and Napa native, Molly, in the University of San Diego School of Law Criminal Procedure Moot Court Competition and placed in the Top 16 out of 31 teams. Tia looks forward to improving her oral argument and trial practice skills this summer while making her first court appearances.
By Carlos Villatoro Public Affairs and Media Officer

The Napa County District Attorney’s Office participated in the Annual Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics June 20, 2024.

Various staff members were joined by Napa Valley College Police Department, Napa County Probation and Napa State Hospital Police to carry the torch from Veterans Memorial Park to the Napa County Sheriff’s Department for the next stretch of the run to American Canyon.
IN THE COMMUNITY

Out & About

NAPA COUNTY MANAGEMENT ACADEMY GRADUATION 6/06/2024

FORENSIC TRAINING WITH SUMMER LAW CLERKS 6/6/2024

PRESENTING TO ROTARY CLUB OF CALISTOGA 5/30/2024

LEADERSHIP NAPA VALLEY CLASS 36 GRADUATION 5/31/2024

Photo credits: Carlos Villatoro and courtesy
People V. Gabriel Chavez

Gabriel James Chavez, age 25, is charged with murder, assault with a semiautomatic firearm, and two counts of assault by means to produce great bodily injury. He is additionally charged with the special allegation of personal and intentional use of a firearm, use of firearm, use of weapon, vulnerable victim, and violent conduct.

It is alleged that Chavez shot Vallejo resident Andres Fabian Sandoval, age 39, on Saturday, June 8, at the Oak Shores Day Use Area of Lake Berryessa.

Chavez last appeared in court on Monday, June 17, 2024, and entered a plea of not guilty to the charges and special allegations. He is currently being held without bail at the Napa County Department of Corrections and is due back in court on July 17 at 9 a.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court for a pre-preliminary hearing.

The case against the defendant is being handled by Napa County Deputy District Attorney Rolando Mazariegos.

People V. Leslie Tapia

Leslie Ponce Tapia, age 28, is charged with child abuse, driving under the influence of alcohol, and the special allegation of driving with a passenger under 14 while committing DUI.

Tapia is alleged to have driven while under the influence of alcohol with her infant child in her vehicle, at one point leaving the child inside the hot vehicle for over two hours as she went to a nearby Starbucks, where she was found in a state of intoxication.

Tapia last appeared in court on June 20, 2024, for an arraignment hearing, where she pled not guilty to the charges and special allegation. She is due back in court at 9 a.m., on July 18 for a pre-preliminary hearing in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court.

Deputy District Attorney Kayla Richeson is prosecuting the case against the defendant.
People V. Mauricio Aguilar

Mauricio Ramirez Aguilar, age 40, was sentenced to 15 years to life in state prison following his conviction of second-degree murder and gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated.

Napa County Superior Court Judge Elia Ortiz sentenced the defendant during a June 12 hearing for his role in the death of Yountville resident Constantine Tsavalas, age 87.

Mr. Tsavalas, a resident of the Veterans Home of California at Yountville, lost his life during a wreck that occurred at 3 p.m., Oct. 17, 2020, at the intersection of Highway 29 and Hoffman Lane.

On that day, the defendant was driving a white pickup truck southbound along Highway 29 at a high rate of speed when he collided with a Nissan pathfinder driven by the victim who was entering the highway from Hoffman Lane.

A subsequent investigation determined that Aguilar had a blood alcohol content of .204 percent, nearly three times the legal limit of .08 percent, and drove at speeds of 86 miles per hour or more at the time of the wreck.

Back in May, a Napa jury convicted Aguilar of murder and gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated. The Honorable Judge Ortiz also found Aguilar to be in violation of DUI probation. The case against the defendant lasted 12 days and Deputy District Attorneys Katie Susemihl and Kayla Richeson presented the case on behalf of the People.

A second-degree murder charge involving an individual who causes death while DUI is a relatively rare occurrence in Napa County. Known as a Watson Murder – after a 1981 California Supreme Court ruling that made it possible for district attorneys in California to charge second-degree murder in certain DUI accidents when someone is killed – the case calls for prosecutors to prove implied malice.

Under the legal concept of implied malice DDAs Susemihl and Richeson were required to prove the defendant engaged in activity that he knew was likely to lead to a death and did the act heedless of the consequences. Prior to the defendant’s May 15, 2024, conviction he had twice been convicted of DUI – both incidents involved vehicle wrecks, and both were discussed during his trial.

In 2008, Aguilar hit a parked car along Kansas Avenue in Napa while DUI. Then, on January 27, 2019, he drove his vehicle into a power pole, which set the vehicle on fire, in front of the California Highway Patrol office on Golden Gate Drive. Napa firefighters extricated the defendant from the wreck and a subsequent investigation revealed he was DUI.

During both prior DUI sentencings Mr. Aguilar was given a Watson Admonition, a warning given to a person convicted of DUI informing them that being under the influence of drugs of alcohol, or both, impairs their ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

The admonition further states that it is extremely dangerous to human life to drive while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or both, and they can be charged with murder if they kill someone while doing so.
People V. Jose Carlos Rivera-Torres

Napa County Superior Court Judge Elia Ortiz terminated the probation of Jose Carlos Rivera-Torres, age 34 – who on May 16 was found to be in violation of his Napa County probation – during a June 3 hearing and sentenced him to three years in state prison.

The Napa County District Attorney’s Office filed a petition to revoke the probation of the defendant, who was placed on felony domestic violence probation in 2023.

Rivera-Torres, age 34, was accused of violating his probation for failing to obey all laws by inflicting corporal injury to a domestic partner and violating a domestic violence protective order.

The defendant was previously acquitted of the domestic violence charge, but convicted of three counts of violation of a protective order on January 26, 2024, by a Contra Costa County jury.

At the May 16 hearing, the Napa Superior Court found the defendant in violation based on the domestic violence conduct as well as the restraining order violations.

The case was handled by Deputy District Attorneys Agnes Dziadur and Lauren Kownacki.

People V. Armondo Perez

A Napa County jury found Armondo Perez, age 33, guilty of driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) and driving while having a .08 percent or higher blood alcohol level after a two-day jury trial prosecuted by Deputy District Attorney Erik Lawrence.

He was additionally found to be in violation of the special allegation of having an excessive blood alcohol content (BAC) level while driving.

On December 4, 2023, Perez was involved in a single-vehicle accident near the intersection of Imola and 4th avenues. Perez drove a red BMW sedan into a wire fence to the east of Imola Avenue. A subsequent DUI investigation revealed that Perez was intoxicated at the time of the accident, and had a BAC level of .15 percent, nearly twice the legal California limit of .08 percent.

Napa County Superior Court Judge Larry Hayes sentenced Perez to summary probation for three years with terms and conditions and five days in jail. He is ordered to remand into the custody of the Napa County Department of Corrections on July 11, 2024, at 8 a.m., to being serving his jail sentence.

He is also ordered to pay the fine of $1,563, restitution fine of $150, and enroll and complete the MADD Impact Panel.