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District Attorney Margaret Moore prioritizes violent crime over low-level drug offenses and the numbers back it up

District Attorney Margaret Moore released statistics today to demonstrate her administration's approach to felony cases: prioritize prosecution resources to focus on violent crime and to reduce the impact of low-level drug and theft cases.

"When I took office, I knew we had to find a way to lessen the impact low-level drug and theft cases were having not only on those racking up those convictions but also on our whole felony court system," Moore said. "My prosecutors were frustrated with the practice of disposing of these cases with yet another meaningless felony conviction, when their time could be spent preparing and trying some of the most difficult and violent offenders."

Her answer was to create a specialty docket using strategies to incentivize treatment options over incarceration and reduce the impact that repeated felony convictions has on offenders. On May 31, 2019, the program completed one year of operations. With the collaboration of the district judges, low-level drug and theft offenses, punishable by imprisonment in the State Jail Facility for up to 2 years, were moved to a specialized docket under one judge and one prosecutor. During the time the State Jail Court has been in operation, over 1,000 cases were diverted from district court dockets to the specialty court docket.

The results are dramatic. In the State Jail Court's first year, Travis County has seen a 94% reduction in felony convictions for these low-level offenses. Community supervision, that includes a treatment program, is offered to a majority of defendants regardless of criminal history. The State Jail Court docket has also saved public resources by greatly reducing the need for lab analyses and expediting the time it takes for the State to provide the defense discovery. There has been a drastic decline in the length of time it takes for a case to move through the system. It takes an average of 52 days to resolve a case on the State Jail Court docket compared to the average 191 days it took to dispose of a case prior to the implementation of the new docket.

At the same time Moore shifted the emphasis in her Office to getting more serious, violent crimes to trial. During the time Moore has been in office (January 2017 until present), Travis County juries have returned 15 life sentences on violent crimes such as capital murder, sexual assault, aggravated robbery, and continuous sexual abuse of children cases. In violent offenses across the board, Moore's administration has seen over 4,750 pleas or findings of guilt in the most serious cases. (For a list of offenses considered to be violent for purposes of these numbers, see the attached chart). There have been approximately 160 jury trials involving violent offenses during her administration.

Moore says she is doing what she believes the community wants to see when it comes to prosecuting crime in Travis County. "When I talk with jurors after trials, I hear their strong reactions to violent crimes that threaten our public safety, and I also hear their reasoning when they recommend community supervision. The results of our trials definitely inform the priorities of this Office. We are ensuring that ever-scarcer public resources are used to further public safety."

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