



Michael O. Freeman
Hennepin County
Attorney's Office

2017 Highlights



Message from the County Attorney

In 2017, we successfully prosecuted two cases against racists: A jury found Allen Scarsella guilty of shooting and wounding five men who were peacefully protesting outside the Fourth Precinct police station and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. In a separate case, Anthony Sawina was also found guilty and was sentenced to 39 years in prison for shooting at five young Muslim men in a car in Dinkytown.


As shown in these cases and so many others, **gun violence** continues to be a serious problem and innocent people often end up being the victims in these **senseless crimes**. Our office is working to combat them by charging felons who are found to be in possession of a gun, which is against the law. We prosecute these cases and seek the highest possible sentences.

With regard to the **opioid crisis**, I have joined with other county attorneys and county commissioners from Ramsey and Washington counties in taking the bold step of filing civil lawsuits against the manufacturers and distributors of opioid drugs. Our office also continues to vigorously prosecute drug dealers and we are working to raise awareness and educate the public about the highly addictive nature of opioids as a way to prevent addiction.

We must charge cases without fear or favor. In October, we obtained a **guilty verdict against Minneapolis Police Officer Christopher Reiter** for kicking a suspect in the face while the suspect was on his hands and knees.

As for the investigation into the fatal shooting of **Justine Damond Ruszczyk by Minneapolis Police Officer Mohamed Noor**, a dedicated team in our office has been diligently working on this case. Our goal was to complete the review and make a decision on whether or not to bring charges by the end of 2017, but we are getting more information and evidence, and additional investigation must be completed. As I have stated, the investigation and review of the case will not be rushed. It is more important to get it right than to get it done quickly.

Finally, I was honored to be elected to a one-year term as president of the **National District Attorneys Association**. This allows me to learn from other jurisdictions and gives me the chance to share some of our best practices with others across the nation.



Mike Freeman

Hennepin County Attorney



Bringing justice to crime victims

Prosecuting 4th Precinct shooter

In April, 25-year-old Allen Scarsella was sentenced to 15 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of all 12 counts brought against him for shooting five African-American men at a demonstration near the Minneapolis Police Department 4th precinct. This office took a very strong stand against Mr. Scarsella: "The racist language he used in the videos and on social media is just not acceptable," County Attorney Mike Freeman said. "The actions he took as a result of those racist beliefs were heinous. The jury obviously saw it the same way."



Minneapolis fire department administering aid to Tevin King, one of the five men shot by Allen Scarsella at the Fourth Precinct.



Shooting of Muslim men leads to 39 years in prison

In May, a jury rejected Anthony Sawina's claim that he was acting in self-defense when he shot five Somali men in Dinkytown. He was found guilty of all nine counts and sentenced to 39 years in prison. At his sentencing, just minutes after contritely apologizing to the Somali and Muslim communities and to the men he wounded, Sawina lashed out about the stiff sentence handed down by the judge. As deputies moved in to take him away, he shouted "People are killing each other and they get less time. This is injustice at its finest and you know it."

Holding police accountable

Police officers must be held accountable for their actions. In October, we obtained a guilty verdict against Christopher Reiter for kicking a suspect in the face while the suspect was on his hands and knees. The outcome of this conviction is that Mr. Reiter will never be able to serve as a cop again. Three other officers have been charged in three different crimes and their cases will move forward in 2018.



Protecting community safety



Combatting the opioid crisis

Under Minnesota law, anyone who provides an illegal drug to someone who subsequently dies from that drug can be charged with third-degree murder. We began filing those charges against drug dealers in 2007 when we prosecuted just two cases. In 2016, the number jumped to five. This year, 12 people were charged and 162 opioid-related deaths were reported.

In November, the Hennepin County Board, at our urging, initiated a lawsuit against the makers and distributors of opioid drugs. As was the case when Minnesota successfully sued tobacco companies in the 1990s, we believe that pharmaceutical companies misled doctors and the public about their pain killing drugs. We will be seeking millions of dollars in damages.

Getting drug dealers off the streets

Beverly Burrell, a prolific drug dealer, has been charged with third-degree murder for selling drugs to four individuals. One of them was 20-year-old Lucas Ronnei, who died from an overdose of heroin. Burrell is currently serving 14 years in prison for the deaths of Ronnei and also 21-year-old Max Tillitt. The two other cases are awaiting trial.

Charging domestic violence crimes

Sadly, each year the Hennepin County Attorney's Office charges hundreds of cases where one person in a relationship abuses their partner. An example of this is Mitchell John Antil, 53, who pleaded guilty to first-degree assault for shooting his girlfriend in the face. She survived and bravely testified against him in court. The judge sentenced him to 206 months in prison, an upward departure, justified by the particular cruelty of the crime.

Victims can receive help from the Domestic Abuse Service Center, a division within our office, which provides access to legal assistance and social services that may be needed.

Raising awareness of sexual assault

At our annual Community Leadership Awards, we honored Sarah Super for her work advocating for sexual assault victims/survivors. After she was raped in 2015, Super started a non-profit called Break the Silence, which provides support for sexual violence survivors



to share their stories. Super and others have also successfully lobbied for a memorial to sexual violence survivors, which should break ground in the spring on Boom Island Park.

Supporting youth

Focusing on early intervention



Our be@school program, which focuses on early intervention in partnership with community agencies, has seen improvement in attendance as a result of delving deeper into why a child misses school.

We found that some students with many absences came from loving homes, but had transportation problems getting to school. Another student might have fewer absences, but might be dealing with severe parental neglect at home and in need of additional services offered by child protection.

Statistics indicate that our new approach is working. The program numbers show that in the past five years, the number of students referred from schools in Hennepin County to be@school has increased each year. And yet, last year the number of cases be@school sent to child protection for neglect dropped.

Diverting juveniles out of the justice system

When juveniles are charged for an offense, we provide services to eligible youth and hold them accountable instead of forwarding their case to court. In 2017, more than 2,000 juvenile cases were diverted.

Enforcing child support

Our Child Support Division worked with 8,570 families in 2017, ensuring that children have the support they need from both parents. Our office enforces child support laws and we helped collect close to \$100 million last year.



Improving school attendance

Studies show that when students go to school, every day, on time, they are more likely to succeed. And if youth succeed there, they are less likely to commit crimes. Members of the Dream Big campaign received a Community Leadership Award for Education for their work over the past eight years to improve school attendance among Native American children.

The key to their success has been including Native American elders in discussions with children who have been truant. In addition, children who attend school 95 percent of the time are eligible for financial rewards.

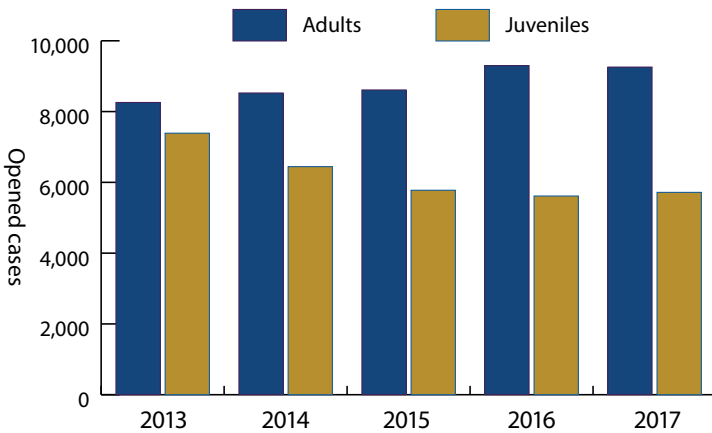
Keeping kids safe

We work to keep children safe from ongoing abuse or neglect. Last year, 1,578 child protection court petitions were filed.

2017 By the Numbers

16,326 new cases were opened in 2017

Criminal Division cases between the years of 2013-2017



Our advocates provided support and services to 35,049 individuals for cases moving through the criminal justice system.

1,029 cases of a gun used or allegedly possessed.



Our office is working to combat gun violence by charging felons who are found to be in possession of a firearm, which is against the law. We prosecute these cases and seek the highest possible sentences.



With **460** employees our Office is the largest public law office in the Minnesota. **188** attorneys are on staff.

There are 9 divisions

Adult Prosecution

Civil

Child Support

Juvenile Prosecution

Victim Services

Adult Services

Child Protection

Community Prosecution

Special Litigation

Diverted cases

We recognizes that public safety may be best served by diverting first-time offenders from the criminal justice system. Our diversion programs refer them to social services, chemical dependency or mental health resources.

538 adult 
2,045 juvenile 

13,443 individuals contacted our Domestic Abuse Service Center for legal support and social services they needed as a result of domestic violence experienced personally or by a family member or friend.

Photo on the cover: Mike Freeman meeting with Colleen and David Ronnei, whose 20-year-old son Lucas died from an overdose of heroin.

For more information about 2017, visit:
hennepinattorney.org/annualhighlights.



Mission and overview

We serve justice and public safety through our commitment to ethical prosecution, crime prevention, and through innovative and reasoned client representation.

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