

Anoka County Attorney's Office

A photograph of five classical columns, likely from a government building, with the year 2020 overlaid in white text across the center.

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Annual Report

Justice, Advocacy, Prevention

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OUR MISSION

*The mission of the Anoka County
Attorney's Office
is to pursue justice,
advocate for citizens' rights,
and lead the community
by focusing on crime prevention and
fair governance.*



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Dear Anoka County Residents,

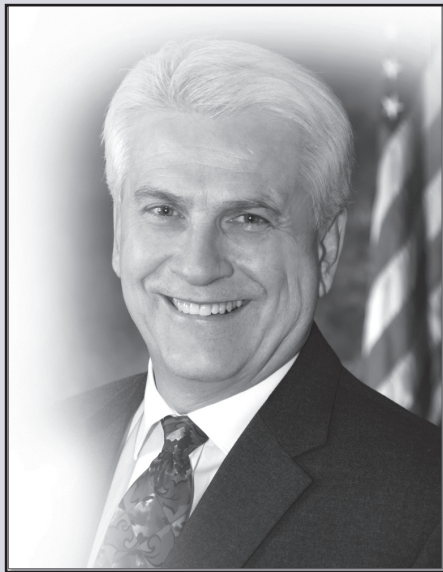
In March 2020, as the world grappled with the scope and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Anoka County Attorney's Office faced the question, "How do we provide services to the public while maintaining a safe work environment?" Fortunately, the technology we had in place allowed our staff to continue providing those services while working remotely. We coordinated with courts, other county departments, and outside agencies to continue our work with them in a new, virtual way.

This office is essential to the justice system and we needed to continue our mission, even though the rules of social interaction had changed dramatically. Criminal hearings needed to be held; crime victims still needed help; child support needed to be collected; issues affecting juveniles needed to be addressed; county contracts, litigation, and legal advice still needed to be administered; and investigations were still carried out. All of this in the midst of major social issues like election integrity concerns and violent civil unrest. Our community was in crisis and we

tried to remain stable in an unstable world. With the great perseverance of our staff, I believe we succeeded.

This report gives you the 2020 numbers, but it doesn't tell the whole story of the achievements of this office. Those are found in the public's confidence that we were there for them when they needed help.

Tony Palumbo



Tony Palumbo was elected Anoka County Attorney in 2010 after more than 30 years as an Assistant County Attorney. He was re-elected in 2014 and 2018. He began his career as a law clerk in this office in 1977 and passed the bar in 1979. He has served in each division during his tenure.

Civil Division

The Civil Division provides legal services to county departments, the County Board, Sheriff and County Administrator. Its work is diverse and is driven by the breadth and variety of issues facing Anoka County. To protect the county's interests, the Civil Division offers training to county staff on liability reduction, data privacy, best employment practices, and other topics of interest.

The Civil Division's responsibilities include:

Civil Litigation: Defending the county in civil claims and lawsuits.

Contracts: Drafting, negotiating, and providing legal advice about county contracts.

Employment: Providing legal advice and representation to county departments on labor and employment matters.

Real Property: Representing the county in property-related matters.

Appeals: Handling criminal, juvenile, and civil appeals at the state and federal level, as well as federal habeas corpus cases.

Civil Commitment: The Protective Services Unit (PSU) is responsible for the civil commitment of the developmentally disabled, chemically dependent, mentally ill, the mentally

ill and dangerous, sexual psychopaths, and sexually dangerous persons. PSU also receives referrals on defendants found incompetent in criminal court, and it provides legal advice in vulnerable adult cases.

Bryan Frantz,
Division Chief

Attorneys:

Christine Carney

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Lisa Jones

Kelsey Kelley

Bryan Lindberg

Steve Nash

Nancy Norman Sommer

Jason Stover

Kathryn Timm

Robert Yount

Anne Zimmerman

Support staff:

Amanda Usher, *Interim*

Administrative Supervisor

Glenna Anderson

Katie Barber

Kim Holbrook

Jen Orpen

Donna McLain

Mikayla Meyers

Emily Peterson

Civil Division By The Numbers

In 2020, the Civil Division was a crucial player in Anoka County's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our attorneys worked on many legal issues arising from the pandemic, advising the County Board and department heads. The legal work included **three** rounds of federal stimulus funding, new emergency family and medical leave policies, and novel Open Meeting Law questions.

Our Civil attorneys advised Human Services and Public Health Nursing on a variety of matters related to the COVID emergency response, care and testing sites, and vaccination clinics. And we advised the board on countywide emergency declarations related to the pandemic, as well as during the civil unrest following George Floyd's murder.

The pandemic was hard on the community's most vulnerable and the 2020 numbers show an increase in system-involved mentally ill individuals. Our Protective Services Unit opened **189** civil commitment cases, compared to **167** the previous year. But about **60%** of 2020's cases began after the middle of the year and **35%** began in the last three months. That upward trend indicates that as the pandemic wore on, things got worse for the mentally ill. We are currently on pace to have **225** cases in 2021. This would be a **35%** increase over 2019.

A significant portion of the annual Civil caseload involves contracts, which the division handles for other county departments. In 2020 the Civil team created **369** new contracts for other county agencies.

The Civil Division handled **50** appeals cases (all practice areas) in 2020.

The County Attorney's Office processes all forfeitures forwarded by local law enforcement, including the sheriff's office and the Anoka-Hennepin Narcotics and Violent Crimes Task Force, and represents those agencies in court proceedings to remove property that was used in the commission of a crime. There were **142** new forfeiture cases in 2020, compared with **190** forfeitures in 2019 and **201** forfeitures in 2018.

The county, through the Civil Division, is responsible for representing the state of Minnesota in probate cases. Probate is the legal process of settling an estate after a person has died. Our office steps in when the state seeks repayment for medical assistance expenses incurred by the state during the life of the deceased person. In 2020, our office opened **435** probate cases and recovered more than **\$1.5 million** — a record high for Anoka County.

Criminal Division

The Criminal Division of the County Attorney's Office is responsible for prosecuting adults and juveniles charged as adults.

Our office handles the most serious crimes committed in Anoka County, including homicide, sexual assault, child abuse, controlled substance offenses and robbery.

With a few exceptions, misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor crimes are prosecuted by the city attorney for the city in which a crime occurs.

The County Attorney's Office Criminal Division has 15 Assistant County Attorneys, also known as prosecutors. The prosecutors are responsible for reviewing an investigation and determining whether a person will be charged with a crime.

This charging decision is based upon a review of an investigation conducted by the Anoka County Sheriff's Office, a local police department or a state investigatory agency. Once a decision to prosecute has been made, the prosecutor files a complaint to initiate the court proceedings. Certain investigations are presented to a grand jury for charging consideration.

After charging, it becomes the responsibility of the prosecutor to represent the State of Minnesota at court hearings and at trial.

Wade Kish,
Division Chief

Stacy St George,
Asst. Division Chief

Attorneys:

Beth Beaman
Trevor Johnson
Kelsey Kelley
Matthew Loeffler
Paul Ostrow
Jessica Plotz
Amy Reed-Hall
Jessica Rugani
Andrea Sampson
Laura Schwartz
Brenda Sund
Kristian Weir
Paul Young

Support staff:

Nicole Prater, *Division Administrative Supervisor*
Angie Anderson
Ashley Blumberg
Mary Doppenberg
Diana Hudalla
Jennifer Staerk
Nicole Thompson
Alexandra Wolfgram
Emily Zehowski

Criminal Division By The Numbers

Criminal Division operations in 2020 looked much different from previous years. Court hearings went virtual and trials were placed on hold, but crime persisted — even increasing slightly over 2019. Technology was a crucial element to our work and we rose to the challenge of learning new skills. The year was an exercise in innovation, flexibility and patience.

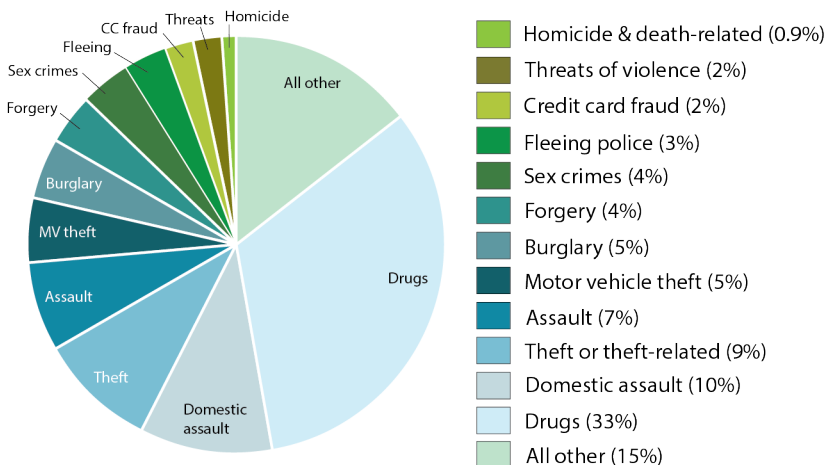
In 2020, the Anoka County Attorney’s Office received **2,494** felony case referrals from law enforcement agencies. The criminal division issued complaints in **1,929** cases — representing a **77%** charge rate.

Approximately **33%** of the criminal division caseload was dedicated to prosecuting controlled substance crimes in 2020. The most common drugs involved were methamphetamine, marijuana and heroin.

Person crimes — which range from possession of child pornography to elder abuse to homicide — represented **32%** of charged cases. Property crimes made up **25%** of cases.

Our office filed charges against **18** individuals in connection to **13** deaths. These death-related cases get the most media coverage and require an enormous amount of investigative and prosecutor time, but represent less than **1%** of the caseload.

Criminal caseload: 2020 charges



Family Law Division

The **Family Law Division** provides legal services to the Anoka County Child Support Services department when court action is required to establish paternity or to establish, enforce, or review a child support obligation.

The Anoka County Attorney's Office does not represent either parent in the child support or paternity proceeding.

Child Support Services is the public agency responsible for child support enforcement. The County Attorney's Office responds to referrals from Child Support Services.

A case may be referred when public assistance is being expended or a person applies for services through the agency. For each case referred, the Family Law Division attorneys and support staff prepare, serve, and file legal documents with the court so appropriate child support orders may be issued.

Francine Mocchi,
Division Chief

Attorneys:

Alicia Bohach
Dorrie Estebo
Nick Jannakos
Christine Rogers
Brett Schading
Dawn Sieber

Support staff:

Melissa Epping, *Division
Administrative Supervisor*
Lori Buchta
Carrie Freeland
Hannah Garcia
Kayla Gooler
Andrea Manthei
Traci Melberg
Mary Ellen Plante
Carissa Purvis

By The Numbers:

In 2020, Child Support Services had **11,170** open cases, of which **1,577** were referred to the County Attorney's Office for legal action. The Family Law Division opened **776** new referred cases. There was a **23%** decrease in referred actions and a **10%** decrease in new cases from the previous year.

In 2020, division staff participated in **1,238** court hearings — **25%** fewer than 2019.

The decrease in numbers was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to peacetime emergency orders, many child support enforcement remedies such as Contempt and Driver's License actions were unavailable or prohibited.

Juvenile Division

The Juvenile Division represents Anoka County in matters involving children.

Delinquency actions: Attorneys in the Juvenile Division prosecute offenses committed by children in Anoka County. These offenses range from juvenile status or petty offenses like underage drinking and curfew to delinquency offenses like assault, robbery and murder. Juveniles certified to stand trial as adults are prosecuted by the Criminal Division.

Child protection actions: The Juvenile Division pursues legal actions to protect abused or neglected children through Children in Need of Protection and Services (CHIPS) proceedings and Termination of Parental Rights.

Truancy and School Attendance: Addressing excessive school absences through a truancy intervention program reduces the number of truancy cases that end up in court. The Juvenile Division provides presentations at local schools about the socioeconomic and court consequences of truancy and works with families to find solutions.

Jon Audette,
Division Chief

Attorneys:

Kathy Doty
Andrew Loose
Lee Martie
Alexis McKim
Heather Pilon
Shauna Ryan
Michelle Thompson

Support staff:

Jessica Lane, *Division Administrative Supervisor*
Alexandria Borowski
Sally Gauthier
Lisa Talbot
Tiffany Westlund
Kathy VonBargen

By The Numbers:

The Juvenile Division worked to be innovative and flexible during the upheaval of 2020. The division went completely paperless, attended hearings remotely, and revamped the truancy intervention program when in-person meetings were not an option. Numbers decreased, but resourcefulness and collaboration were higher than ever.

The Juvenile Division opened more than **1,700** new cases and attended more than **1,500** court hearings in 2020, representing decreases of **27%** and **55%**, respectively, from the previous year.

Of the **1,042** delinquency cases opened (a **40%** decrease from 2019), **393** were petitioned (charged) in court and **304** were referred for diversion. There were **532** truancy referrals, of which **91** were brought to court.

There were **246** child protection cases filed, including **44** Termination of Parental Rights cases.

Victim/Witness Services

Per Minnesota law, crime victims have the right to be notified of court events, to participate in the prosecution process, and to protection from harm. The **Victim/Witness Services** staff make certain those rights are upheld while guiding victims through the criminal justice system.

This is no easy task under the best of circumstances, as the criminal justice process is inherently fraught with trauma and stress. But the Victim/Witness (VW) unit met the challenges of 2020 with agility and resourcefulness.

The team was an early adopter of new technologies. While working remotely, staff not only worked with prosecutors and courts to coordinate virtual witness testimony, they also helped victims navigate the remote hearing software.

As a result, we saw a significant increase in victim participation. For many, attending a hearing remotely was more comfortable because they didn't have to be in the same room as the offender. For others, like those who lived out of state or who had accessibility challenges, they were able to attend remote hearings when, under pre-pandemic circumstances, they may not have otherwise been able to participate. Likewise for people who had kids at home because of school closures.

The VW staff took advantage of the courts' slowdown to attend more than 300 trainings, webinars, podcasts, and documentary viewings. Most focused on underserved populations. Topics included racial justice, immigration, homelessness, trafficking, elder abuse, gender bias, victimization of indigenous people, impact of crime on historically marginalized communities, and LGBTQ advocacy.

Emily Douglas,
Manager

Staff:

Emily Bakken
Alicia Brandenburg
Clark Edblad
Jessie Hassebroek
Holly Lammers
Shandra McGhee
Loni Payne
Johnna Preidt
Andrea Struzyk
Bethany Walker

By The Numbers:

Average caseload: **231** cases (a **118%** increase over 2019's average of **106**)

New victims and victims' relatives: **2,312**

Contacts with victims or other participants: **36,221**

Restitution recouped: **\$627,000**

Non-English speakers assisted: **76**

Domestic violence victims identified as high-risk in lethality assessments: **111**

Investigations Unit

The Investigations Unit investigates white collar crimes, financial exploitation of vulnerable adults, welfare fraud, civil liability claims, election law violations, and employment-related matters. The team includes investigators who specialize in computer and cell phone forensics.

Lorraine Gabbert,
Manager

Investigators:
Laura Ostrom
Paul Talbot

The Anoka County Attorney's Office hired its first in-house investigator in 1971. When it was first created, the division handled primarily welfare fraud cases. Investigations continues to work hand-in-hand with the county's Economic Assistance Department on those cases, but the workload has expanded to include referrals from other agencies dealing with complex fraud or financial crimes.

Although they are not peace officers, the investigators do conduct criminal investigations and work in tandem with law enforcement agencies.

By The Numbers:

The Investigations Unit was an integral part of the office's continuity in 2020. Investigators assisted other divisions **148** times during the year with things such as defendant and witness locates, trial preparation, subpoena or other process service, and background checks. The unit also investigated several internal personnel matters.

The unit investigated **50** economic crimes in 2020, including theft by swindle, embezzlement, financial exploitation of vulnerable adults, public assistance fraud, and bad checks.

The investigators also handle computer forensics and analyzed **11** electronic devices. In one case, evidence obtained from a phone resulted in the offender being civilly committed as a Sexually Dangerous Person.

Allegations of voter registration or voting law violations are reviewed by the Anoka County Attorney's Office Investigations Unit. There were **17** election law violation referrals in 2020, up from 13 the previous year. Cases investigated in 2020 included Unlawful Voting, Ineligible Voter Knowingly Voting, and Ineligible Registration.

Administration

At the direction of County Attorney Tony Palumbo, the Administration unit manages the office's daily operations.

Administration staff duties include oversight of construction, technology, internal policies, personnel matters, communications, and budgeting. In short: they are the glue that hold the ship together.

In 2020, the bulk of Administration's energy went into three major technology projects: a new case management system, a new multimedia center, and emergency equipment for remote workers.

When a pandemic was declared in the early months of 2020, the Anoka County Government Center was closed to the public and many employees began working from home. The Administration team coordinated funding for the technology needs of staff working remotely, to disperse equipment to people's homes, and to facilitate tech support and resources.

Planning for a new case management system had been underway for two years when the pandemic hit. The sudden move to remote work and paperless operations highlighted the need for a more modern system, so the project kicked into high gear. Similarly, the office had begun work on a new Media Room — a space providing the latest technology and multimedia tools — and pressed ahead to complete the project so the space would be available for remote trials and webinars.

Because the County Attorney is an elected official he works independently of, but in cooperation with county administration.

The County Attorney's Office has an annual budget of \$9.8 million. About 90% of the budget covers staffing costs.

Marcy Crain,
Chief Deputy County Attorney

Amanda Usher, *Administrative Manager*
Laurie Larson, *Administrative Coordinator*
Julie Anderson, *Office Support Specialist*
Patty Iverson, *Office Support Specialist*
Dede Olds, *Office Support Specialist*
Debbie Olson, *Office Support Specialist*

Nancy Mallinger, *Technology Manager*
Charles Karanja, *Technical Analyst/Operations Coordinator*
Christy McKinney, *Technical Analyst/Operations Coordinator*

Doreen Borntreger, *Executive Assistant*
Ron Geier, *Accountant*
Elizabeth Mohr, *Community Relations Coordinator*

Grant-funded programs

The County Attorney's Office, like many public-service organizations, uses grant funding to augment programs and services. In some cases our office is the grantee and in others we are partners with other agencies, but in all cases these programs are collaborative, multi-disciplinary efforts.

Abuse in Later Life: The Anoka County Attorney's Office is a partner in a grant-funded program led by Alexandra House that focuses on victims of abuse in later life (victims who are at least age 50). The program aims to enhance services and outreach for victims by providing training to law enforcement and other service providers and building a coordinated community response. This effort builds on the Safety from Abuse and Financial Exploitation (SAFE) Elders Initiative, created by the Anoka County Attorney's Office in 2011.

Auto Theft: The Anoka and Washington County Attorneys' Offices have partnered on a grant-funded program dedicated to reducing auto thefts through education and tougher prosecution since 2004. Funding comes from the Minnesota Department of Commerce.

Crime Victims Prosecutorial Services: Victim/Witness Services in 2019 was awarded a two-year renewal of this state grant to bolster access to the justice system for underserved victim populations, including elderly and non-English speaking. The funds have supported training, public education efforts, and staff who focus on the grant-supported work.

Direct Client Assistance: With the help of state and federal funding, the Victim/Witness Services unit is able to offer emergency funds to victims. Examples of emergency financial services include: paying for a hotel to provide a temporary safe place, renting a truck to help a victim move, purchasing a replacement phone, or covering the cost of lock changes.

Lethality Assessment Program: The County Attorney's Office, in partnership with local law enforcement agencies and Alexandra House, uses federal grant funds for training and services related to assessing high-risk domestic violence situations. The program, now in its 11th year, has been highly successful in reducing domestic homicides.

Outreach & Partnerships

- Attorneys and staff provided trainings on a variety of subjects to law enforcement, court staff, other Anoka County departments, victim-advocacy organizations, and attorney associations. Our attorneys are often asked to participate in advisory committees at the state level.
- This office and its staff are involved in multiple cross-agency collaborative committees, including (to name a few): Abuse in Later Life, Minnesota Alliance on Crime, Mediation and Restorative Services, Tenth Judicial District Equal Justice Committee, Anoka County Joint Law Enforcement Council, Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, and the Violence Prevention Roundtable of Anoka County.
- The County Attorney's Office has an internal Diversity & Inclusion Committee aimed at improving inclusivity within our office and the community through training and engagement, and diversifying our workforce to better reflect the community we serve.
- Victim/Witness Services led an outreach campaign targeting Anoka County seniors. The Adopt A Grandparent program aimed to connect seniors with volunteers from our office, who would correspond with their "adoptees" in an effort to reduce the pandemic-related isolation and disconnectedness.
- Our staff often volunteer or participate in awareness campaigns for issues and organizations related to our victim-service work. While most of the in-person outreach events were canceled in 2020, there remained opportunities. Some staff volunteered to cook and serve meals at Hope 4 Youth, an Anoka-based nonprofit that provides shelter and resources to homeless youth. Others participated in The Darkest Night of Your Life VIRTUAL 4K on June 5, which raised more than \$60,000 for Hope 4 Youth.



Top photo: Attorneys Lisa Jones (L) and Kelsey Kelley (R) prepared and served a meal at Hope 4 Youth. Bottom: Family Legal Assistant Andrea Manthei (L) and Community Relations Coordinator Elizabeth Mohr (R) participated in the 4K.

Accolades

County Attorney Tony Palumbo was honored with the Minnesota State Bar Association's Julius E. Gernes Prosecutor Award of Excellence in May 2020. The award, issued by the MSBA's Public Law Section, recognizes "the work and dedication of an outstanding public attorney working in the State of Minnesota as a County/City Attorney and/or as a criminal prosecutor at the federal, state, or local level. The award is named in memory of the late Julius E. Gernes, former Winona County Attorney and Chief Prosecutor who was well known and highly regarded by county attorneys throughout Minnesota and whose professional achievements as a public attorney encompass the attributes of this award." Tony was nominated for the award by Dakota County Attorney Jim Backstrom.

Two Anoka County Attorney's Office staff received Awards of Excellence from the County Board in July:

- Victim/Witness Specialist Andrea Struzyk received the Customer Service award for her work with victims and witnesses in preparation for the commitment trial of a sexual psychopathic personality/sexually dangerous person. The task of reaching out to multiple victims from prior sexual assaults to establish rapport and ask them to testify at the trial was no small undertaking. Some victims were not happy about being contacted. Without Andrea's patience, persistence, advocacy, and unwavering encouragement, the victims in this case would have likely been unwilling to testify at trial. In the end, four victims testified, and the defendant was committed.
- Investigator Paul Talbot received the county's Performance award for his work on an email scam case that targeted county coffers. Paul discovered that an email appearing to be from a vendor came to the county requesting a wire-transfer payment instead of a mailed check, which is the standard for vendor payments. Nearly \$1 million in county funds had already been transferred from the county's account to the account of the scammer. Paul set to work contacting the banks to cancel the transfer and return the funds to the county. Without Paul's timely and persistent actions, the county could have suffered a huge loss.

Contact Us

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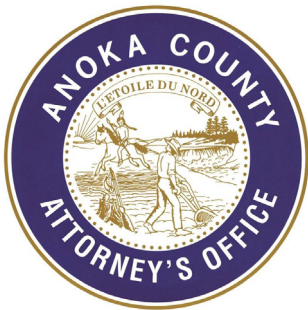
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Anoka County Attorney
TONY PALUMBO
Justice, Advocacy, Prevention.