



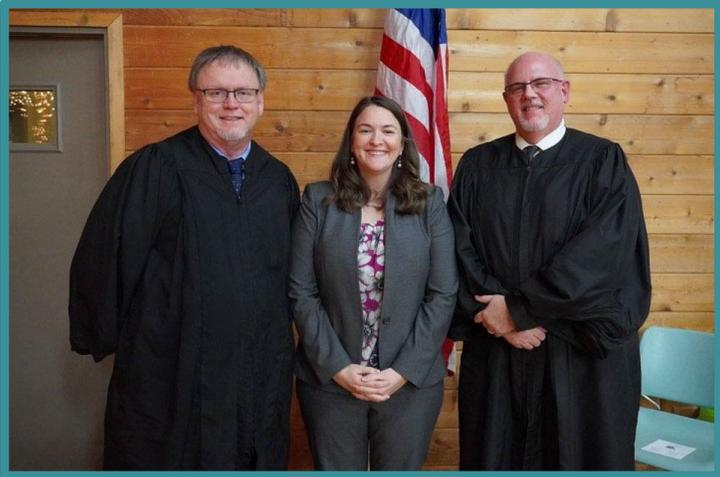
LANCASTER

2023 Annual Report

Law Director & City Prosecutor,
Stephanie L. Hall

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I. INTRODUCTION & GENERAL INFORMATION

- A. Law Director & City Prosecutor: The City of Lancaster is organized under the general statutory plan of municipal government. Therefore, pursuant to Ohio Revised Code (“ORC”) § 733.49, the City Director of Law “shall be elected for a term of four years, commencing on the first day of January next after his election. He shall be an elector of the city.” In addition to being a Lancaster resident who has reached the age of majority, ORC § 733.50 prohibits any person from being “eligible to the office of city director of law who is not an attorney at law, admitted to practice in this state.” Presently, Stephanie L. Hall, who resides within the municipal corporation limits and holds Ohio attorney registration number 0082045, is the elected Law Director & City Prosecutor. Her term expires December 31, 2027. She is also licensed to practice in the United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, and the Supreme Court of the United States.
- B. Duties: The Law Director is responsible for providing civil and criminal legal services as enumerated in the ORC for the City of Lancaster. The Law Director & City Prosecutor also prosecutes all adult misdemeanor crimes that occur in Fairfield County by contract with the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners, the City of Reynoldsburg, and the City of Pickerington.
- C. Location & Hours: The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office is located on the second floor of the Fairfield County Municipal Court at 136 W. Main Street, Lancaster. The office is open from 7:45 am to 4:15 pm, Monday through Friday, and closed on all City holidays.
- D. Contact Information: You can reach the office during normal business hours by calling (740) 687-6616. For general inquiries, assistance, or public records requests, the office email address is: lawdirector@ci.lancaster.oh.us. Additional information regarding the office as well as staff contact information can be located on the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s homepage which can be found on the City of Lancaster’s website at: <https://www.ci.lancaster.oh.us/196/Law-Director>.



II. LAW DIRECTOR & CITY PROSECUTOR STAFF



Law Director & City Prosecutor Stephanie L. Hall was appointed in January of 2022 and elected in November of 2023, but has been with the office since she started as a Licensed Legal Intern in 2006. As Law Director, she is chief legal counsel for the City and as City Prosecutor she is responsible for the prosecution of all adult misdemeanor crimes in Fairfield County. Stephanie is an Amanda-Clearcreek graduate, and she received her bachelor's degree from Ohio University and her juris doctorate from Capital University Law School.



Assistant Law Director Mitch Harden is responsible for both civil and criminal matters. He advises City administrators and elected officials, department superintendents, boards, commissions, and committees on a variety of legal issues. He also supervises the prosecution of criminal cases and appeals. Mitch is a Logan High School graduate, and he received his bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University and his juris doctorate from Capital University Law School. He has been with the office since April of 2017.



Senior Attorney Dave Klemp represents the City and State in all stages of prosecution in the Fairfield County Municipal Court and Fifth District Court of Appeals. He also serves as the City's second Family Violence Prosecutor currently. Dave is a Westerville North graduate, and he received his bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University and his juris doctorate from Capital University Law School. He has been with the office since May of 2017. Prior to that he practiced in insurance subrogation.



Family Violence Unit Prosecutor Joe Sabo represents the City and State in all stages of prosecution in the Fairfield County Municipal Court and Fifth District Court of Appeals. Originally from Northeastern Ohio, Joe received his bachelor's degree from Kent State University and his juris doctorate from Case Western Reserve University School of Law. He has been with the office since January of 2019. Prior to that he practiced in the areas of civil litigation and non-profit law.



Assistant Prosecutor James Young represents the City and State in all stages of prosecution in the Fairfield County Municipal Court and Fifth District Court of Appeals. James received his bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University and his juris doctorate from Capital University Law School. He has been with the office since October of 2021. Prior to that he served in the Navy and practiced as a criminal defense attorney in Southeast Ohio.



Assistant Prosecutor Andrew Semelsberger represents the City and State in all stages of prosecution in the Fairfield County Municipal Court and Fifth District Court of Appeals. Andrew received his bachelor's degree from Belmont University and his juris doctorate from Suffolk University Law School. He has been with the office since November of 2022.



Office Manager Teresa Sandy serves as support staff for the Law Director and Assistant Law Director and prepares easements, contracts, legislation, and other legal documents as well as managing all budgeting, collections, supplies, payroll, and grant coordination. Teresa is a Fairfield Union graduate. She has been with the office since January of 1996. Teresa is retiring January 31, 2024, after 28 years of service. Congratulations Teresa!



Victim Services Paralegal Jenny Swope serves as support staff for prosecutors exclusively handling victim-related offenses, including domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. She also assists all victims of violent crime with navigating the prosecutorial process. Jenny is a Logan High School graduate, and she received her associate degree from Hocking College. She has been with the office since July of 2007.



Paralegal Elisabeth Azbell serves as support staff for the prosecutor handling non-victim related and traffic offenses on Judge Ullom's docket. Elisabeth is a Berne Union High School graduate. She has been with the office since January of 2010.



Paralegal Liz Martens serves as support staff for the prosecutor handling non-victim related and traffic offenses on Judge Fields' docket. Liz is a Lancaster High School graduate, and she received her bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University. She has been with the office since December of 2014. Liz will be appointed to replace Teresa Sandy as the Office Manager effective February 1, 2024.



Clerical Assistant Taci Miller serves as general support staff for the office. She also assists members of law enforcement and the public with their requests for criminal charges. Taci is a Liberty Union High School graduate and received her bachelor's degree from Youngstown State University where she majored in criminal justice. She has been with the office since August of 2022. Taci will be appointed to replace Liz Martens as a Paralegal effective February 1, 2024.

III. Civil Report

- A. Legal Counsel: Pursuant to the Ohio Revised Code, the Law Director & City Prosecutor is legal counsel for all City Departments, City Administration, City Council, City Boards, Committees and Commissions, and the Lancaster Board of Education. The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office attends all regularly scheduled council, committee, commission, and board meetings, as well as special meetings when requested. The Law Director & City Prosecutor also serves as legal counsel for the Lancaster Port Authority, a complex component unit dedicated to local economic development.
- B. Legislation: The Law Director & City Prosecutor is responsible for preparing all legislation for City Council. The chart below details the number of ordinances and resolutions provided in 2023 and how that compares to prior years.

YEAR	ORDINANCES	RESOLUTIONS
2017	41	146
2018	30	100
2019	32	152
2020	35	140
2021	51	147
2022	44	163
2023	52	140

- C. Legal Opinions: The Law Director & City Prosecutor issues oral and written legal opinions upon request of City Council, City Administration, City Departments, City Boards, City Schools, and the Lancaster Port Authority. The Law Director & City Prosecutor encourages written opinions so that the City develops an archive to assist with complex legal issues now and in the future. Many legal opinions were sought and issued in 2023 regarding a variety of topics. These opinions are not public records as they are privileged attorney/client communications.
- D. Civil Litigation: In 2023, the City was actively involved in twenty (20) cases involving community block grant mortgage foreclosures, allegations of personal injury, allegations of federal and state law violations, declaratory relief actions, construction law claims, and constitutional law challenges. The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office litigates these cases internally and in some cases, with the assistance of outside counsel. Due to the nature of civil litigation, additional details regarding these pending civil litigation cases are attorney/client privileged and/or work product privileged but may be made available to City Council members for review.
- E. Self-Insured Claims: The City received eight (8) insurance claims in 2023 involving damage to vehicles, persons, and property. Of the eight (8) claims filed, four (4) were denied; two (2) were paid by City Departments, and two (2) are still pending. The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office assumed this responsibility in 2006 in order to save the City approximately \$20,000.00 annually. The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office, in conjunction with the City’s insurance agent, processes, investigates, and reviews these claims against the City in the context of governmental immunity. Due to the nature of these claims, additional details regarding their review and disposition are attorney/client privileged and/or work product privileged but may be made available to City Council members for review.

- F. Internal Legal Counsel: The Law Director & City Prosecutor and her staff provide advice and legal counsel to the Mayor, Service Safety Director, Auditor, Treasurer, Income Tax Commissioner, and all department heads who administer the various City departments. In 2023, in addition to constant phone, text, and email communication, the Law Director met personally with the Mayor and Service Safety Director bi-weekly to assist with the lawful and efficient operation of the City.
- G. Outside Counsel: The Law Director & City Prosecutor is responsible for coordinating the efforts of all outside counsel for the City. Below are the attorneys and firms the City used in 2023 for legal issues that required outside counsel.
1. Bond and Tax Counsel: [Squire Patton Boggs](#) – The City utilized the bond expertise of attorney Allison Binkley and tax law expertise of attorney Michael Cullers.
 2. Labor Counsel: [Fishel Downey Albrecht & Riepenhoff, LLP](#) – The City negotiated all five of its collective bargaining agreements in 2023 with the assistance of attorney Marc Fishel.
 3. Construction Law Counsel: [Bricker & Eckler](#) – The City contracted with attorney Mark Evans for his assistance with a variety of public improvements.
 4. Workers’ Compensation Counsel: [Fishel Downey Albrecht & Riepenhoff, LLP](#) – The City utilized the Bureau of Workers’ Compensation expertise of attorney David Riepenhoff.
 5. Special Prosecutors: Various – In an effort to save taxpayer money, whenever there is a conflict of interest that precludes the City Prosecutor from prosecuting a criminal matter, the City trades special prosecution services with other political subdivisions. In 2023, Assistant City Prosecutors served as appointed counsel in three (3) criminal cases at the request of the Fairfield County Prosecutor’s Office, the City of Zanesville, and the Perry County Prosecutor’s Office.
 6. Insurance Carrier Appointed Outside Counsel: Various – The City’s insurance carriers appoint various outside legal counsel to litigate lawsuits filed against the City in which the insurance carrier is providing coverage on the claim.
 7. Tax Incremental Financing (TIF): [Bricker & Eckler](#) – The City utilizes the economic development expertise of attorneys Caleb Bell and Colin Kalvas.
- H. Board of Education: Pursuant to Section 3313.35 of the ORC, the Law Director is authorized to represent the Board of Education of the Lancaster City School District. The Law Director & City Prosecutor provides advice and legal representation to Lancaster City Schools as needed.
- I. Additional Civil Services:
1. Down Payment Recovery: The Law Director reviews all contract forms for the Community Development Department for the award of Community Development Block Grant Funds and assists in the recovery of these funds in foreclosure and bankruptcy cases.
 2. Collections for Damage to City Property: Since 1998, the Law Director’s Office has conducted collections actions for all City departments when City property is damaged (i.e., fire hydrants, guardrails, and other City infrastructure). In 2023, the Law Director’s Office obtained judgments for, collected, and/or forwarded to collections \$4,381.97 in taxpayer funds.

3. **Zoning and Code Enforcement:** The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office is mandated by ORC to handle misdemeanor zoning and code enforcement prosecution for the townships and villages in Fairfield County. As these political subdivisions adopt zoning and property maintenance codes, prosecutions for these violations continue to increase annually.
4. **Special Assessments:** When property owners fail to comply with property maintenance codes within the municipal corporation limits, the Code Enforcement Department may abate the violation using the services of a contractor. The abatement expense is then assessed against the property’s tax duplicate by the Fairfield County Auditor pursuant to ORC along with an administrative processing fee and a special assessment fee. The Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office coordinates with Code Enforcement to file these assessments on behalf of the City. The property cannot be transferred until the assessed amount is paid in full. The chart below details the total amount of assessments the Law Director filed in 2023 and how that compares to prior years.

Year	Annual Total	
2017	\$53,916.00	These amounts include all Code Enforcement expenditures for mowing, trimming, demolishing, securing and cleaning-up neglected properties.
2018	\$89,276.00	
2019	\$155,235.90	
2020	\$65,282.00	
2021	\$79,507.60	
2022	\$67,514.00	
2023	\$95,056.00	



IV. CRIMINAL REPORT

A. Criminal Prosecution: Pursuant to ORC 1901.34, the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office is responsible for the prosecution of misdemeanor criminal cases arising in the City of Lancaster and in the unincorporated areas of the county. Since 1997, the Law Director & City Prosecutor has contracted for reimbursement to the City for prosecution work performed for all the villages in Fairfield County (Amanda, Bremen, Carroll, Lithopolis, Millersport, Pleasantville, Rushville, Sugar Grove, Thurston, and West Rushville) by negotiating one contract with the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners. Additionally, the Law Director negotiates prosecution contracts with the City of Pickerington and the City of Reynoldsburg due to the number of criminal cases being filed and prosecuted in the Fairfield County Municipal Court from those jurisdictions. Through this process, the Law Director & City Prosecutor is responsible for the prosecution of all adult misdemeanor crimes that occur in Fairfield County, Ohio. This provides uniformity of access and expectations to Fairfield County law enforcement and the Fairfield County Municipal Court in the investigation and prosecution of adult misdemeanor crimes.



B. Criminal Statistics: The Court’s statistics for the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office for 2023 represent the major use of resources of this office. Approximately 80% of the budgetary funding for the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office is used for criminal prosecution. Management and prosecution of the high volume of cases takes a team approach. Because of the short timeline for prosecution of misdemeanor cases (30-90 days without a time waiver), cases continue regardless of the availability of the prosecutor. Our office assigns Assistant Prosecutors to the dockets as needed to keep cases moving forward in the courts. The chart below gives a breakdown of cases prosecuted in 2023 and how that compares to prior years.

Fairfield County Municipal Court Statistics 2017 - 2023

Year	Misdemeanor	OVI	Other Traffic	Jury Trials	Trials to Court	New Court Filings
2017	2,917	633	13,981	12	2,629	21,453
2018	2,517	532	12,347	13	2,114	19,616
2019	2,382	571	12,223	13	2,111	19,663
2020	1,782	372	8,381	3	1,182	13,539
2021	1,665	387	8,189	2	1,047	13,191
2022	1,764	560	9,980	11	1,191	15,485
2023	1,868	455	7,851	16	1,220	13,878



C. Specialized Dockets: The Fairfield County Municipal Court operates four (4) specialized dockets with the assistance of the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office. Senior Attorney, Dave Klemp, provides victim input and legal guidance for the Court’s Fresh Start Drug Court Program (defendants with substance use disorders), Mental Health Court (defendants with mental health diagnoses), Veterans’ Treatment Court (defendants who are Veterans), and Special Abilities Court (defendants who receive services from the Fairfield County Board of Developmental Disabilities).

D. Grant Funding: Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Grant – The Law Director & City Prosecutor applies annually for VAWA funding to help cover the expense of one (1) Assistant Prosecutor position in our Family Violence Unit. This position focuses on and expedites the prosecution of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking cases, and coordinates comprehensive victim services for victims affected by these crimes in Fairfield County. In 2022, we were awarded \$44,264.08 in VAWA funds from the Office of Criminal Justice Services to continue funding this position in 2023, bringing the Law Director’s total grant funding award amount to \$3,004,769.15 (for all grants).

E. Family Violence Unit: To ensure efficient and effective prosecution of these cases pursuant to the Fairfield County Domestic Violence Protocol, and to assure that crime victims’ constitutional rights are guaranteed, the Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office operates a Family Violence Unit. This Unit is funded in part by the VAWA grant. The Unit consists of two (2) Assistant Prosecuting Attorneys and one (1) Victim Paralegal that focus solely on coordinating and prosecuting these cases, separate and apart, from the other general criminal offenses being prosecuted by our office. The Family Violence Unit makes it possible to devote the additional time and attention needed to successfully prosecute these cases. The chart below gives a breakdown of victim prosecutions and how that compares to prior years.

Family Violence Unit Statistics 2017 – 2023				
Year	DV Intakes	Stalking Intakes	Other SB 2 Cases	Total Victims Served
2017	261	23	487	770
2018	284	27	600	905
2019	280	27	842	1,149
2020	252	14	752	1,018
2021	242	20	693	955
2022	434	15	596	1,030
2023	483	29	649	1,161

F. Law Enforcement Training: The Law Director & City Prosecutor's Office provides free training annually on a variety of issues to all Fairfield Law Enforcement. In 2023, these trainings focused on the topics below.

1. *Fairfield County Domestic Violence Protocol*: This training was provided to all newly hired Lancaster Police Department Officers who are not familiar with the Fairfield County Domestic Violence Protocol which focuses on best practices for handling victim cases.
2. *Traffic & Criminal Case Law Update*: This training was provided to all Pickerington Police Department Patrol Officers to educate them about important changes to case law in the Supreme Court of Ohio and Fifth District Court of Appeals.
3. *Lancaster Citizens Police Academy Introduction to Criminal Law & Domestic Violence*: This training, which was designed to help Lancaster Police Department volunteers understand the basics of criminal law and domestic violence, was provided to all participants in the 2023 Lancaster Citizens Police Academy class.
4. *Crisis Intervention Training*: This training was provided to the Fairfield County Law Enforcement officers attending this year's multi-disciplinary ADAMH Crisis Intervention Training, which focused on the process of emergency admission for mentally ill individuals pursuant to the ORC.
5. *City of Lancaster Canine Unit Implementation Training*: This training was provided to all Lancaster Police Department Patrol Officers to help them effectively utilize a police canine.
6. *Driving Under Suspension Refresher Training*: This training was offered on an as needed basis to all Patrol Officers appearing in the Fairfield County Municipal Court. Officers who were trained received a reference sheet to assist them with properly charging drivers who are operating without a valid license.



2023 IN REVIEW

On behalf of my office, I hope you have found the foregoing 2023 Annual Report useful. While I have the benefit of seeing much of the data included here as it is being collected, something in the year end statistics always comes as a surprise. Sadly, in 2023, it was an unpleasant revelation; in 2023, we broke a record for the number of domestic violence and stalking cases that the office has handled in one year. These crimes – which it may surprise you to learn are commonly misdemeanors – are intimate and terrifying violations with physical, mental, financial, and social consequences that extend far beyond the perpetrators and survivors.

The delicate and complex nature of these crimes requires a specialized approach, and I am grateful to continue the Family Violence Unit (“FVU”) my predecessors started to manage these cases proactively. Over the years, this office has applied for and received hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal grant funding to help offset the cost of one of our two FVU Assistant Prosecutors (the maximum award is only \$60,000.00 annually). Obtaining and tracking grant revenue is difficult and time consuming, but this funding is crucial to providing experienced legal professionals to prosecute perpetrators and protect survivors of these heinous crimes so we will continue to apply as long as it is available.

Fortunately, we are not alone in our efforts to combat the effects of domestic violence and stalking in Fairfield County. I am confident that our amazing community partners, including citizens, law enforcement, elected officials, and non-profit organizations, will help us determine the underlying reasons for these specific increases and remediate them. I want to express my sincere appreciation for the support my office has received from all our community partners in our collective effort to hold offenders accountable and help survivors heal in 2023. My faith in their continued collaboration and assistance gives me hope for 2024.

Congratulations Teresa!

As noted in the Staff section above, Office Manager Teresa Sandy served this office and the City of Lancaster honorably for 28 years. She is retiring on January 31, 2024, and her absence will be felt keenly, both personally and professionally, city-wide. We hope that her much deserved retirement is everything she dreamed it would be!

