



LANCASTER

## **2024 Annual Report**

Law Director & City Prosecutor,  
Stephanie L. Hall

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<i>I. Introduction &amp; General Information</i>	3
<i>II. Law Director &amp; City Prosecutor Staff</i>	4
<i>III. Civil Report</i>	6
<i>IV. Criminal Report</i>	9
<i>V. In Review</i>	12



# 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 holds Ohio attorney registration number 0082045 and is also licensed to practice in the United States District Court, Southern District of Ohio, and the Supreme Court of the United States, is the elected Law Director & City Prosecutor. The Law Director’s current term expires December 31, 2027.
- 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, statutorily for the City of Lancaster, and 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](mailto: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 2024, 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 Liz Martens was appointed on February 1, 2024. She 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. 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 and previously served as a Paralegal.



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 criminal 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 Taci Miller serves as support staff for the prosecutor handling non-victim related criminal and traffic offenses on Judge Fields' docket. 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.

### 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.
- B. Legislation: The Law Director is responsible for preparing all legislation for City Council. The chart below details the number of ordinances and resolutions provided in 2024 and how that compares to prior years.

YEAR	ORDINANCES	RESOLUTIONS
2020	35	140
2021	51	147
2022	44	163
2023	52	140
2024	57	136

- C. Legal Opinions: The Law Director 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 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 2024 regarding a variety of topics. These opinions are not public records as they are privileged attorney/client communications.
- D. Civil Litigation: In 2024, the City was actively involved in thirty-one (31) 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’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 twelve (12) insurance claims in 2024 involving damage to vehicles, persons, and property. Of the twelve (12) claims filed, nine (9) were denied; one (1) was paid by a City Department, and two (2) are still pending. The Law Director’s Office manages the City’s insurance claims to save the City approximately \$20,000.00 annually. The Law Director’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 2024, 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 2024 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 navigated grievances with its collective bargaining units in 2024 with the assistance of attorney Marc Fishel.
3. Construction Law Counsel: [Bricker Graydon, LLP](#) – The City contracted with attorney Mark Evans for his assistance with a variety of public improvements.
4. Energy Counsel: [Bricker Graydon, LLP](#) – The City utilized the energy expertise of attorneys Glenn Krassen and Caleb Bell.
5. 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, the City trades special prosecution services with other political subdivisions. In 2024, Senior Attorney Dave Klemp served as special prosecutor in one (1) felony criminal case at the request of the Fairfield 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. Economic Development Counsel: [Bricker Graydon, LLP](#) – The City utilizes the economic development expertise of attorneys Caleb Bell and Colin Kalvas for Tax Increment Financing projects, Community Reinvestment Areas, New Community Authorities, Cooperative Economic Development Agreements, and Joint Economic Development Districts.

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 provides advice and legal representation to Lancaster City Schools as needed.

I. Lancaster Port Authority: The Law Director also serves as legal counsel for the Lancaster Port Authority, a complex component unit of the City dedicated to local economic development. The Lancaster Port Authority Board meets monthly, and the Law Director prepares resolutions for the Board to enact. The Law Director also assists with the Port’s sales tax exemption leases, conduit bonds, real estate sales and purchases, and many other day-to-day aspects of the Port’s operations. In 2024, the Law Director spent a significant amount of time reviewing and preparing documents and coordinating with outside counsel for the City and Port’s \$300,525,000.00 pre-pay gas transaction.

J. 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**: The Law Director’s Office pursues collections actions for all City departments when City property is damaged (i.e., fire hydrants, guardrails, and other City infrastructure). In 2024, the Law Director’s Office obtained judgments for, collected, and/or forwarded to collections \$1,992.90 in taxpayer funds.
3. **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’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 2024 and how that compares to prior years.

Year	Annual Total	
2020	\$65,282.00	These amounts include all Code Enforcement expenditures for mowing, trimming, demolishing, securing and cleaning-up neglected properties.
2021	\$79,507.60	
2022	\$67,514.00	
2023	\$95,056.00	
2024	\$68,879.00	

4. **Public Records Requests**: Ohio’s Public Records Act guarantees citizens access to municipal records. In addition to advising the various City Departments on how to comply with this law, the Law Director’s Office spends significant time reviewing public records, redacting them, and providing them to the public. In 2024, the Law Director’s Office responded to sixty-one (61) public records requests.

## 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. Since 1997, the Law Director & City Prosecutor has contracted for reimbursement to the City for prosecution work performed for all the villages (Amanda, Bremen, Carroll, Lithopolis, Millersport, Pleasantville, Rushville, Sugar Grove, Thurston, and West Rushville) and unincorporated areas in Fairfield County by negotiating one contract with the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners.



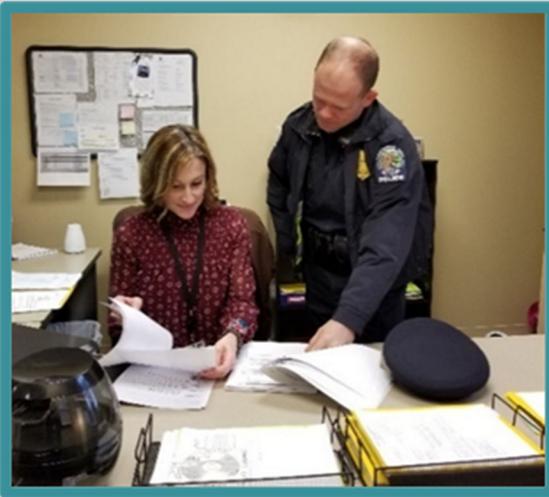
Additionally, the Law Director negotiates prosecution contracts with the City of Pickerington and the City of Reynoldsburg due to the number of criminal cases being filed and prosecuted in the Fairfield County Municipal Court from those jurisdictions. Through this process, the Law Director & City Prosecutor is responsible for the prosecution of all adult misdemeanor crimes that occur in Fairfield County, Ohio. This provides consistency and clarity for Fairfield County law enforcement and the public 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 2024 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 traffic and 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 due to speedy trial rights), cases must be resolved expeditiously. The chart below gives a breakdown of the cases prosecuted in 2024 and how that compares to prior years.

### Fairfield County Municipal Court Statistics 2020 - 2024

Year	Misdemeanor Crimes	OVI	Other Traffic	Jury Trials	Trials to Court	New Court Filings Total
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
2024	1,565	390	7,649	15*	1,388	14,630

\*Does not include one (1) jury trial where the defendant absconded prior to sentencing.



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 2023, we were awarded \$48,816.98 in VAWA funds from the Office of Criminal Justice Services to continue funding this position in 2024, bringing the Law Director’s total grant funding award amount to \$3,055,579.03 (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.

<b>Family Violence Unit Statistics 2020 – 2024</b>				
<b>Year</b>	<b>DV Intakes</b>	<b>Stalking Intakes</b>	<b>Other SB 2 Cases</b>	<b>Total Victims Served</b>
2020	252	14	752	1,018
2021	242	20	693	955
2022	434	15	596	1,030
2023	483	29	649	1,161
2024	427	38	556	1,021

F. Law Enforcement Training: The Law Director & City Prosecutor's Office provides free training annually on a variety of issues to all Fairfield County Law Enforcement. In 2024, 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. The Fairfield County Domestic Violence Protocol focuses on best practices for handling family and dating violence 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. *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.
4. *First Amendment Auditor Training*: This training was provided to all Lancaster City Departments to help them understand what the law requires of them when dealing with First Amendment auditors.
5. *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.



# 2024 IN REVIEW

On behalf of my office, I hope you have found the information contained herein useful. I mentioned in the 2023 Annual Report that Fairfield County’s family and dating violence case numbers were continuing to increase year over year. Fortunately, in 2024, there was a slight reprieve in the total number of victims served – down to 1,021 from 1,161 in 2023; however, the number of stalking intakes we received in 2024 increased by 31%. When I started as an Assistant Prosecutor in 2008, stalking wasn’t even a crime. Ohio enacted Revised Code Section 2903.211 – Menacing by Stalking in 2014, and since then, advances in technology have only made it easier for perpetrators to stalk victims.

Advances in technology have also created other new violations (Dissemination of Image of Another Person or “revenge porn”) and allowed offenders to find new ways to violate old laws (Telecommunications Harassment via social media). In response, this year our Family Violence Unit decided that the 2002 Fairfield County Domestic Violence Protocol was long overdue for updates. The first DV Protocol, as it’s known, was created by former Law Director and current Fairfield County Juvenile Court Judge Terre Vandervoort, to assist Fairfield County law enforcement with investigating and charging these complex and heinous crimes and ensuring victims’ constitutional rights are protected.

So, as I look back at our accomplishments in 2024, I’m also looking forward to introducing our local law enforcement and community partners to the new Fairfield County Family and Dating Violence Protocol in 2025. Hopefully, this streamlined and modernized protocol will enhance our countywide response to victims of family, dating, and sexual violence and improve our ability to hold offenders accountable.

My office couldn’t have undertaken this important task without the cooperation and support of many valuable stakeholders, including: Fairfield County Prosecutor Kyle Witt, Commissioners Steve Davis, Jeff Fix, and Dave Levacy, and Sheriff Alex Lape; Fairfield Area Humane Society Executive Director Corey Schoonover; Pickerington City Manager Greg Butcher and Police Chief Tod Cheney; Reynoldsburg City Attorney Chris Shook; Lancaster City Council, Mayor Don McDaniel, and Police Chief Nick Snyder; Judge James A. Fields, Judge Randall T. Ullom, and Clerk Valeda A. Slone of the Fairfield County Municipal Court; The Lighthouse, Inc., Executive Director Susan Nixon-Stoughton and Victim Advocates Siobhan Hitchcock, Amber Barbour, Relliana Sanders, and Haeleigh Woodard; and The Harcum House Child Advocacy Center Executive Director Cody Tatum. These individuals and their respective entities have been generous with their time, knowledge, funding, or all of the above, and I could not be more appreciative.

As always, from myself and my colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to serve in the City of Lancaster Law Director & City Prosecutor’s Office.

Sincerely,

*Stephanie L. Hall*