

Davidson County Grand Jury

April – June 2025 Session

Honorable Judge Cynthia Chappell, Criminal Court Division VI

The Davidson County Grand Jury met during the second quarter of 2025, from April 8th to June 26th. This session was the first to return to a three day per week schedule, meeting on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of each week. Our Grand Jury was composed of a diverse group of Nashville citizens representative of the Nashville community in age, race and gender. During the session, we were led by our foreperson, Mr. Warner Hassell. While meeting, we heard a total of 1000 cases, with 993 being true bill, and 7 being no true bill. We heard from a variety of witnesses in and out of the criminal justice system who presented these cases, as well as other guest speakers who discussed specific programs aimed at protecting Nashville. Additionally, we toured the Davidson County Sheriff's Office Behavioral Care Center and the criminal intake area at the Downtown Detention Center.

Guest Speakers

During our term, we heard from the following:

- Judge Cynthia Chappell, Criminal Court Division VI
- General Glenn Funk, Metro Nashville District Attorney
- Jay Martin, Assistant District Attorney
- Steven Jones, Detective Metro Police-Criminal Investigative Div.
- Josh Beauchesne, Detective Metro Police- Domestic Violence Div.
- John Grubbs, Detective Metro Police-Youth Services
- Leanna Dugan, Our Kids
- Martesha Johnson, Metro Chief Public Defender
- Larissa Burdette, Davidson Co. Community Corrections Manager
- John Drake, Chief of the Metro Police Department

On our first session, we heard from Judge Cynthia Chappell. We were introduced to the Davidson County Criminal Justice system, how it works, and what our role in it was. It is of note that Judge Chappell expressed sincere gratitude for the ability of a Grand Jury to bring a healthy check and balance to our justice system, and our willingness to be a part of that. We feel that was an approach we kept in mind as we listened critically to witness presentations and asked additional questions when clarity was needed, instead of seeking convenience. We also heard from District Attorney General Glenn Funk. Mr. Funk echoed much of Judge Chappell's sentiments, and added his commitment to protecting Nashville's diverse and growing community by focusing the resources of the DA's office on our most pressing threats. We feel that during our session, the majority of cases presented have been accurately charged

and have not had to have additional charges added, i.e. Felony in Possession of a Weapon, as these have been appropriately added. Finally, we heard from Assistant DA Jay Martin, who served as our liaison to the DA's office before hearing case presentations from MPD Sgt. Michael Spencer.

Also of special note, we heard from Detective Steven Jones, MPD CID. Detective Jones discussed the MPD crime lab, and that Davidson County is the sole Tennessee county to have its own crime lab. The lab is capable of processing DNA evidence, and processing crime scene footage with advanced software reconstruction tools.

We also heard from additional speakers who shared information about their departments and/or programs which we found to be helpful in our process. The tour of the Behavioral Care Center was hosted by Viranda Smith, Intake Service Director of the Davidson County Sheriff's Office, and we found it to be very informative. Our host was able to answer any questions quickly, and we came away from the experience hopeful that any of our Nashville neighbors who are in need of mental health care and/or substance abuse care while in crisis may be able to receive that.

General Observations – Use of Time

Of the total cases heard, the bulk of them were presented by Sgt. Spencer, MPD. We also heard from agents of Metro Animal Care, Tennessee Dept. of Corrections, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, and loss prevention of retailers. In most cases, presenters were on time and well prepared. In certain instances, the Grand Jury did observe that witness testimony was sparse and attempts at recovering information failed. This occurred often when the presenter was not the original officer, and in these moments, we were frustrated and unsure of how to proceed. In other instances, the witness testimony would exceed the required amount needed to establish probable cause. In both examples, the Grand Jury does feel that time could have been used more efficiently. We are grateful to the extensive experience of our Foreperson, Mr. Hassell, for being able to keep the testimony on track and allowing us to be expedient, but thorough in our efforts.

The majority of our cases were presented by Sgt. Spencer, and we appreciated his ability to provide concise summaries of each case, and by being consistent in his presentation across the wide variety of cases as a whole. Sgt. Spencer is an asset to the Metropolitan Police Dept. and the District Attorney's office, and excels in the role of presenting cases to the Grand Jury. Sgt. Spencer was always willing to stop and answer questions, and seek further clarification when necessary.

Of our initial 24 grand jurors selected, 14 were selected to be regular members, and 10 were selected to be alternates. Unfortunately, we were not able to keep these numbers after our first few sessions. While we were able to avoid delays for most of our sessions, it should be noted that for future sessions occurring at three days per week, more full-time alternates may be needed.

Specific Concerns

During the course of our session, we did note that the cases heard represented the current crime statistics for Nashville. A large amount of cases dealt with non-violent theft, like shoplifting. However, we still heard a number of violent crimes like murder, aggravated assault, and domestic assault/sex crimes and child abuse cases.

As echoed by past Grand Juries and witnessed firsthand by this one, too many sex abuse cases take far too long to get DNA evidence processed by a forensic crime lab. It feels beyond superficial to yet again call for this to be fixed in a Grand Jury report, but it cannot be left unmentioned. In a very high number of instances, we are seeing cases that are taking 2-3 years, on average, to receive DNA results. We are told by witnesses and presenters that this is "common". It's important not to infer this as being "normal", as well. This is especially unfortunate when taking into account the fact that as mentioned above, Davidson County is the only county in all of Tennessee to have its own exclusive crime lab. The Grand Jury heard testimony from multiple experts directly involved with the Metro Police Criminal Investigative Division(CID), and to our understanding it was reported that there were still roughly 800+ cases backlogged in the crime lab. Additionally, it was reported that even when lab work is contracted to third party companies, those results still have to be processed by the MPD CID before being valid, which can add months to a request that could potentially be years old by that point. We realize that understaffing and turnover plague the ability of the CID to conduct this crucial work. The Metropolitan Police Department must develop a plan to address this issue and the Mayor and Metropolitan Council must approve the additional resources to resolve this issue.

In the same vein as lengthy DNA results, the amount of time for juvenile abuse victims to get justice is far too high. It's more unfortunate when the cause of this problem is partly due to turnover among the departments that work these cases. A recurring theme seems to involve initial reports receiving little to no follow up, the case gets reassigned to a detective who also makes little attempt at follow up, and then that detective leaves or gets promoted. Another issue that was reported was that of officer suspensions. When an officer is suspended, all of their cases are effectively "frozen" until the suspension is resolved. Sometimes this is a few days, other times it is several months before the resolution, and cases simply drop through the cracks. We are then hearing cases that are re-opened by investigators in the DA's office, but many times these cases are 3-5+ years old at that point. It is hard to imagine justice being done for victims who have waited up to half a decade for a case to be addressed. More needs to be done to reduce the turnover in these departments and reduce the amount of time it takes to conclude these cases.

While there wasn't a large number of violent murders, there was still a surprising number of gun related incidents in Nashville. Some were tragic stories, involving careless owners and children, others were repeat domestic violence offenders already banned from owning weapons yet still able to get them with relative ease. The prevalence of firearms in our

society has led to these circumstances, and juries are challenged to grapple with them as is the justice system. We applaud the DA's office for being tough on gun-related offenses, but we still ask that more be done to reduce harm and increase public education and safety.

Acknowledgments

To conclude, we are grateful for the work of all those who supported us in this endeavor. Special thanks to Jay Martin, for having criminal charge legal definitions at the readily available; Sgt. Spencer for his concise testimony, and our Foreperson Warner Hassell for keeping us on task and on track. Additionally, we are grateful to all the professionals in the DA's Office, Metro Police and Sheriff's Department, and other investigative and support staff who make justice possible. We have seen first hand the challenges that Nashville is faced with, and we have also seen that we have a criminal justice system that is staffed with people who truly care about Nashville. We take confidence in this, and are reaffirmed in our role as Grand Jury members.

FOREPERSON

Warner Hassell

Warner Hassell

Regular Grand Jurors

Frederick Hardison

Hardison, Frederick

Ranata Hickson

Hickson, Ranata

Lance, Andrew

Xuan Pham

Pham, Xuan

Blake Warren

Warren, Blake

Eli Hernandez

Hernandez, Eli

Raymond Jones

Jones, Raymond

Joshua Ligon

Ligon, Joshua

Alisa Sourthall

Sourthall, Alisa

Michael Young

Young, Michael

Curtis G. Johnson Jr.

Johnson Jr., Curtis G

Toles, Nayonna

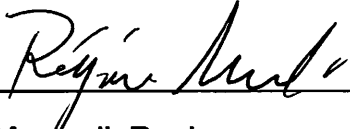
Alternate Members

Terry, Almetric

Wolfe, April

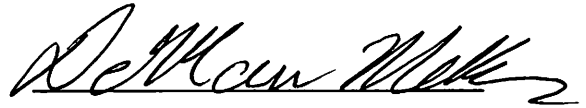
Alternate Grand Jurors

Jones, Junine




Messerli, Regine

Prusinski, Melisse



McBride, DeMario



Parsley, Misty

Ripani, Susan