

**Davidson County Grand Jury**  
**January – March 2023 Session**  
**Criminal Court – Division III**  
**Judge Cheryl Blackburn**

Our session of the Grand Jury for Davidson County, after having been sworn in, met on Wednesday and Thursday every week from January 11 to March 29<sup>th</sup>. We were lucky enough to have a group where everyone was very intent on completing this assignment in an open and purposeful manner. We had many good conversations and debates during our deliberations that led to a tremendous learning experience for all. We were told during selection that this would be a great experience and without a doubt it was.

Our panel was given 677 cases in total including evidence tampering, false imprisonment, domestic violence, identity theft, murder, drugs on small and large levels, evading arrest, fraud, driving under the influence, and the hardest of cases, crimes against children. There were many of these cases that were repeat offenders of the same crimes and that was very telling of some improvements that could and should be made in the system. Overall, we returned a true bill on 661 of these cases with 5 no true bills and 11 cases where the speaker did not appear.

First and foremost, we would like to give great thanks to Mr. Parker Toler, who served as our jury foreperson. Mr. Toler takes the time to explain intricacies that allow for us to make informed decisions. He would engage experts that were needed for particular cases. Most importantly, Mr. Toler brings his love of community and long-standing public service with him every day. It is very evident that he has historical knowledge and the heart for this position, and he holds it with tremendous respect. All grand juries should have the pleasure of working with him. Oh, and the sweets had no bearing on this opinion at all.

Our regular jurors were:

Elizabeth Bedford	Michael Drolick	Teressa Haddix
Warner Hassell	Jessica Heritage	Darrell Ida
Belitica Minnis	Alexandra Moore	Charles Parker
Matthew Smith	Mary Jo Weaver	Darlene Frey

Our alternate jurors were:

Samantha Barrett	Jessi Goodwin	Kenyatta Jones
Mary Malone	Mark Nauert	Lisa Phelps
Suzanne Price	John Rayborn	Shawn Reilly
Albert Morton		

During our meetings we heard from a great variety of law enforcement, security, and local specialists that have worked on the cases that were presented. By and large they were very knowledgeable of the cases and presented fully and succinctly the evidence to make the determinations if a crime had been committed and if it had, if the charged person was likely the person that committed the crime.

Some of the speakers that we heard from were

- Sgt. Edward Conrads & Dr. Gina Crean – Crimes against Children and the Nashville Child Alliance
- Janet Estre & Jason Door – Domestic Violence Unit
- Michael Fisher & Nate Ellsworth – MNP/General Session Liaison
- Scott Harding – BNA Police
- Mike Hotz – Drug Overdose Unit
- Mariah Iles – Homicide
- Steven Jones – Crime Scene Unit

Sgt. Fisher and Ellsworth presented most of the cases that we heard. Both were clear about the cases, the laws that applied, and added appropriate humor to keep us all engaged. They answered our questions readily but made sure that they did not insert their personal beliefs into our decision making.

We were happy to hear that Nashville has a Behavioral Care center to address crimes brought on due to mental health, substance use for disorders, and non-felony charges. The offenders work with staff and therapists to devise a treatment plan that leads to no actual in jail time and support for the individual once they have completed their personalized program. This is a great step towards making Nashville a better place to live for everyone.

### **Concerns of the Grand Jury**

Domestic violence is on the rise. Metro Nashville has approximately 2,500 cases per year. We hear it in the news and heard many instances of this in our cases. COVID increased the incidence, and since we were hearing some older cases, it becomes concerning that there is not much being done to enforce a mandatory order of protection. Realizing that the police can only guide the victim in these cases some harsher guidelines for those that break an OOP or have multiple times abused their victims seems a course of action that should be investigated.

We also heard a lot of gun violations, some involving murder or attempted murder. Unfortunately, the easy availability of guns only makes this more prevalent. Current gun laws cannot stop people from obtaining guns, and the magnitude of crimes being committed with them is astounding. A suggestion might be that the punishments be increased for the use of a gun during a crime. And there needs to be an increase of penalty as well for the “crooks with guns” felonies. These types of cases at no point should be pled out.

We were made aware of a couple of types of crimes that are occurring with regularity in Nashville Davidson County: Identity theft via cell phones and theft rings from retail stores. Historically both might

be thought of as low-level crimes. Targeting tourists or stores and doing whatever you please will continue to grow on itself until our tourist dollars dry up and our retail stores close.

Drugs are a growing concern here in Nashville. We were advised that post-COVID the cost for drugs has reduced, and availability has increased. With the increase of fentanyl laced drugs, there are more incidents of drug overdoses. We were presented with a case where the defendant was being charged with 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder for having provided the drugs. This seems a just charge, if it will not result in a plea deal when going to trial. The dealers know the dangers of what they are putting on the streets: the consequence should fit the crime.

Sexual assault cases and crimes against children were a trigger for this jury. There are some great victim resources available in our community, for children and adults, but the fact that these types of crimes continue to occur and take years to bring to trial is not acceptable. Child crimes are reported at the Our Kids facility at the rate of 800-900 cases per year. All crimes are important, but these seem to not be given a priority, unless they are in certain communities. All our communities deserve to have these cases addressed in a swift manner. This is the future of our city. Again, there should be no plea agreements on these types of cases.

There is a local lab in Madison, built on the premise that we would no longer have to send testing out for evaluation to other labs or the TBI. Specifically, this lab was going to address

- Firearms identification
- Drug identification
- DUI results
- Fingerprints
- Rape Kits
- DNA Profiles

Currently the lab is short staffed due to funding and COVID. Current estimated wait times for rape kits and DNA profiles is 18-24 months. Toxicologists are in high need, but to get them, a competitive wage must be provided. There is Federal funding available currently to deal with the nationwide backlog. Is Nashville Davidson County looking into getting some of these funds so that they can get the right people in to work these cases? Is there a plan to move forward? The victims of these crimes are underserved as the current process displays. "Justice delayed is justice denied".

Most groups that we heard from did also express that there were staffing shortages that prevented them from being able to address crimes in a timely manner. This might be an area that could be improved upon.

The temperature in the Grand Jury room has been a source of discomfort for us all. We start the day in a super-hot room and by midsession we are putting on sweaters and jackets. This should really be addressed for future juries.

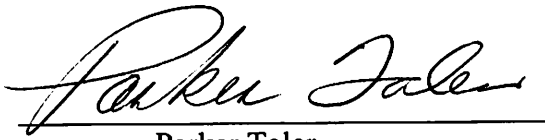
There was one session when we were provided with some wireless microphones with display. The quality of the equipment and the ability to see photos on those microphones was fantastic. If money could be found to provide those on a regular basis, that would surely improve the presentation process.

Regarding the police vest cameras, those have been extremely helpful to ensure evidence and communications were accurately captured. The officers noted that the battery life on these is sometimes prohibitive for full utilization. Upgrades to these batteries would be a huge benefit to law enforcement.

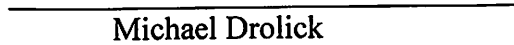
We want to thank you for the experience that we have shared for the last 13 weeks. The countless hours that have been put into each case to make our community a better place are evidenced by the excellent presentations the officers, investigators, special agents, and, most especially, Sgt Fisher provided. You can be certain that if called upon again, you will see many familiar faces.

Grand Jury Report  
January Term 2023  
January 11, 2023 – March 29, 2023  
Parker Toler, Foreperson

Grand Jury Panel Members



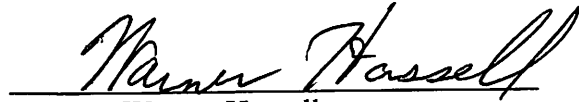
Parker Toler



Michael Drolick



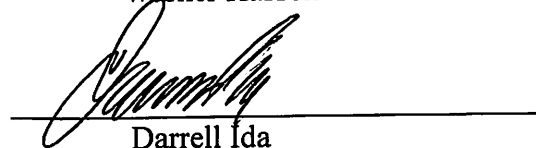
Darlene Frey



Warner Hassell



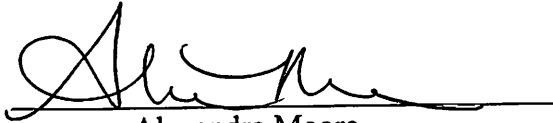
Jessica Heritage



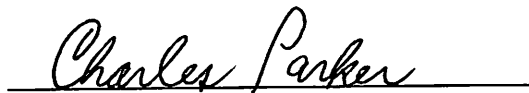
Darrell Ida



Belitica Minnis



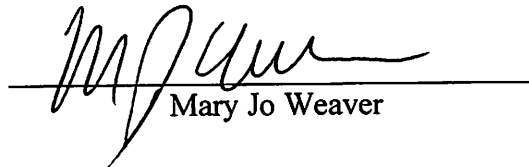
Alexandra Moore



Charles Parker



Matthew Smith



Mary Jo Weaver



Elizabeth Bedford

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Alternate Grand Jury Panel Members

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Samantha Barrett

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Melissa Cherry

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Kaitlin Dastugue

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Dennis Durbin

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Jessi Goodwin

  
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Kenyatta Jones

  
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Albert Morton

  
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Mark Nauert

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Brittany Phar

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Lisa Phelps

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April Presley

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Suzanne Price

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John Rayborn

  
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Shawn Reilly

  
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Mary Denise Malone