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Drug-case plan focuses on pace

Police, prosecutors pursue efficiency

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In a move that could shorten the jail stints served by minor drug offenders in New Orleans, police and prosecutors are working to more quickly agree on which cases to pursue at Criminal District Court, according to a presentation given to the City Council on Thursday.

But the cooperative spirit underpinning the drug initiative went missing later at the meeting, when New Orleans Police Superintendent Warren Riley griped that Orleans Parish District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro had put him on the hot seat by asking him for more investigators.

The dispute ended with City Councilwoman Shelley Midura sharply questioning Riley's policing strategies, and Riley dressing her down in response, saying she would "vote against the citizens' safety."

The drug initiative, which started March 31, begins with New Orleans police officers expediting delivery of reports on drug-possession arrests to the Orleans Parish district attorney's office, said Jon Wool, director of the Vera Institute of Justice's project in New Orleans.

Instead of waiting the 45 to 60 days they are allowed, prosecutors are trying to decide more quickly whether to press charges or refuse the cases, he said.

It seems to be making a difference: During a two-week sample of defendants included in this program, Wool said, the average time it took to decide whether to prosecute someone arrested for drug possession dropped from a baseline of 53 days to 13.5 days.

"That isn't perfect, but after six or seven weeks, that is pretty good," Wool said.

--- Some basic changes ---

The goal is to dispose of minor cases quickly, whether the final outcome is a dropped charge, a guilty plea, a trial or a drug-diversion program. For defendants, the benefit of the streamlined process is spending less time locked up as prosecutors decide how to proceed.

For the system as a whole, the hope is that fewer drug-possession cases clogging up dockets will allow prosecutors, judges and defense attorneys to focus on violent crime, Wool said.

Some of the changes made to expedite the sample cases were basic: buying scanners that allowed officers to e-mail reports to the DA's office instead of driving them over. Police and

prosecutors are also simply working faster.

Leaders across the criminal-justice system said the pilot program demonstrates that they can work together.

"We hope it will save money," said Derwyn Bunton, the chief public defender in Orleans Parish. But Bunton said the process could be improved further — and his office's resources could be reallocated — if prosecutors would directly inform public defenders which cases they plan to refuse. That would allow public defenders to concentrate on clients facing charges, he said.

Cannizzaro also touted the program as a sign that the troubled relations between the two key agencies in the criminal justice system are improving. Cannizzaro said his office is committed to dealing with some nonviolent cases outside the criminal justice system, if possible, noting that the number of people sent to diversion programs has grown since he took office.

--- Violent crime a problem ---

But Cannizzaro also emphasized that violent crime remains a problem. He spent part of his time at the podium pitching the council on his idea to revive investigations of "cold case" murders by placing a team of seasoned NOPD detectives in his office.

"This will go a long way with helping address the violent criminals who are still out there," Cannizzaro said.

The idea got a cool reception from Riley, who instead told the council he will need \$2.2 million to cover overtime in summer. Such a supplement would allow him to implement 12-hour shifts for NOPD officers from July to October. Longer shifts mean more officers working the streets in summer, when violent crime typically spikes, Riley said.

Although the chief said he supports Cannizzaro's idea of reviving old murder cases, Riley said he doesn't have enough officers to subsidize the district attorney's investigative division. "Every officer I take and put somewhere else is not on the street preventing crime," he said.

Cannizzaro countered that he wants current police officers to help with his project, which would target about 100 old murder cases. As opposed to retired officers, current officers are familiar with the ongoing turf wars that often spark shootings in New Orleans, he said.

Midura interjected that a recent analysis by the Metropolitan Crime Commission found that the NOPD had more officers than other cities of comparable size.

"Sounds to me what the DA is suggesting is something like a plan to attack violent crime," Midura said, adding that she won't vote to approve NOPD overtime money if Riley doesn't lay out his own strategies to combat violent crime.

Riley responded heatedly, saying that Midura has yet to commend the NOPD for recent reductions in violent crime.

"You'd vote against the citizens' safety, because the DA chose to put me on the spot here when he has already been told no," Riley said. "I am not going to sit here and be intimidated, influenced or degraded in any way. The answer is no."