

# “Always Be a Problem Solver”

## WHILE THEY ARE CALLED “COMMUNITY PROSECUTORS,” ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEYS WORKING OUT OF POLICE DISTRICTS ACROSS MILWAUKEE EMPHASIZE PROACTIVELY HELPING COMMUNITIES.

BY BILL GLAUBER

It’s another long workday in the legal life of Kelly O’Neill.

She’s one of eight community prosecutors in the Milwaukee County District Attorney’s Office. Instead of spending hours daily at the courthouse, she’s in some of Milwaukee’s more challenging neighborhoods.

To be sure, she rubs shoulders with police officers inside a fortress-like station where she has a desk in an office that looks out onto a hallway. But on this day, like most, O’Neill is on the ground, in the community, meeting with groups and residents.

What she does mostly is gather information and offer advice. So she listens. To the hopes and dreams of those overseeing the opening of a residential treatment facility for women experiencing substance abuse issues. To the promises made by a landlord to upgrade security

(At left) Savanah Brooks, safety manager, Near West Side Partners, and Jeff Kranz, assistant chief, Marquette University Police Department, and (far right) Kent Lovern, district attorney for Milwaukee County, listen as Kelly O’Neill, assistant district attorney, speaks at a safety working team meeting of the Near West Side Partners in Milwaukee in September 2026.

at an apartment property where weeks earlier a young woman was shot. To concerns raised by the leaders of a local Montessori school that sits across the street from the troubled apartments.

"It's much more proactive work," O'Neill said about her role. "Knowing the areas. Connecting with people. I think a lot of my job is knowing the resources, knowing where their use is appropriate, knowing who to contact and who to involve when addressing an issue."

## Why the DA's office calls it "the Community Partnership Unit"

Community prosecutors are part of what the district attorney's office calls the Community Partnership Unit. They are assigned to each of the City of Milwaukee's seven police districts, the positions funded with a mix of private and public dollars. The eyes and ears of the district attorney's office, they are the "prosecutor next door," who can be easily contacted by residents, community organizations, and police.

**"Our goal is to improve the quality of life for people who live in the neighborhood."**

**— Kelly O'Neill, community prosecutor in Milwaukee**

Their aim is to identify and deal with problem properties and people. And they help stitch together a diverse coalition to make communities safer, bringing together city and county attorneys, an array of agencies such as city health and public works departments, community-based organizations, and citizens.

O'Neill, a 2013 Marquette University Law School graduate, has been part of the program since 2019, starting out in the Third District police station on the city's west side. Since 2021, she has overseen a smaller slice of turf closer to downtown. These are the seven neighborhoods on Milwaukee's near west side, which includes anchor institutions: Marquette University, Aurora Health Care, Molson Coors, Potawatomi Ventures, and Harley-Davidson.

She is the team captain for the community prosecutors.

Her position is funded by Near West Side Partners, a nonprofit charged with revitalizing the area's neighborhoods to make them unique places to live, work, and play. "Kelly is the glue between the community and the police," said Savanah Brooks, safety manager for Near West Side Partners.

To Milwaukee County District Attorney Kent Lovern, the work of O'Neill and the other community prosecutors is vital to keeping streets safe. "The community prosecution program has become an absolute central part of our prosecution program in Milwaukee County," Lovern said. "For more than 20 years, we've had prosecutors work with neighbors throughout the city—and with police and other organizations—to identify concerns at the local level. We work to solve problems at the local level before they become larger concerns."

"You have to want to work with everyone you encounter in a very proactive way," Lovern added. "The criminal justice system is generally seen as an adversarial process, for understandable reasons. Yet a community prosecutor has to have enormous skills in working, even outside that process, with people from all walks of life. Lawyers who are community prosecutors are incredible listeners."

## Marquette Law School links, from the classroom to the street

Over the decades, the program has forged strong links with Marquette Law School. Marquette law grads including O'Neill have dotted the community prosecutor roster from the beginning. Currently, six of the eight community prosecutors are Marquette lawyers.

It was another Marquette lawyer, Derek Mosley, who first filled the community prosecutor role locally, in 1999. Mosley, who went on to serve as a judge of the Milwaukee Municipal Court for 20 years, now directs Marquette Law School's Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education.

And for 13 years, Jeffrey Altenburg, now Milwaukee County's chief deputy district attorney, co-taught a course at the Law School in community prosecution, encouraging students to "always be a problem solver." His co-teachers were Christopher Ladwig and Benjamin Wesson, who have become part of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Milwaukee. With the changes in their roles, there is a plan for O'Neill and Assistant District Attorney Jesica Ballenger to take over teaching the course, beginning with the spring term of 2027.

"To use your skills as a lawyer to always be looking at how to solve problems via the law, but also through collaboration and partnerships, that's the gist of the class," said Altenburg.

Community prosecution programs became established nationally several decades ago. A 1990 initiative in Portland, Oregon, created by Multnomah County District Attorney Michael Schrunk, was influential.

In a 2007 interview with the Center for Justice Innovation, Schrunk recalled the program's genesis in a Portland neighborhood that was underutilized, prone to crime, and yet ripe for a renaissance

and development. A local safety action committee was formed. Schrunk attended meetings and later assigned a senior deputy to take over. Eventually, the local committee asked for a lawyer to be assigned to the area.

It was a success.

"Well, the goal is to get ahead of the curve, to take a look at what is causing the drug dealing in the park or the theft from the shopping centers or the home break-ins, etc.," said Schrunk, who served as district attorney in Portland for 32 years and died in 2023. "It's getting people at the table to talk about how this affects us, how this affects you, how can we work together. We want to get ahead of crime before the police or SWAT teams have to come in to arrest people, before you get a knifing or a shooting or drug dealing taking over a park."

Interest in the Portland program grew across the country, eventually gaining the attention of E. Michael McCann, then-Milwaukee County district attorney. He approached one of his young prosecutors, Mosley, taking him to a conference in Washington, D.C., to explore the community prosecutor idea.

The program wasn't part of the "broken windows" theory of law enforcement, which holds that signs of lawlessness and disorder can lead to deeper problems. Instead, Mosley said, "This was more focused on making law enforcement, the district attorney's office, more accountable to the public and also a partner with the public, as opposed to people sitting in the courthouse."

## Step one: Getting to know the neighborhoods

Mosley became a believer in the initiative and in 1999 became the county's first community prosecutor, focusing on the Harambee and Williamsburg Heights neighborhoods on Milwaukee's north side. The position was funded by a federal grant around quality-of-life issues. He was joined in the role by another young prosecutor, Shannon Wittenberger.

Mosley said he spent the first three weeks on the job "getting to know the neighborhoods."

"We held meetings," he recalled. "It was so long ago, we were given pagers and gave everyone our pager numbers. We were a conduit between the police department and the neighbors. And relationships improved."

Prosecutors became so embedded in the community, he said, that they were invited to kids' birthday parties. "We did more than just typical district attorney's office work," he said. "We showed the neighborhood we were committed to that actual neighborhood."



(Left to right) Quintin Harris, Marquette University police officer, and Kelly O'Neill, following a meeting at Near West Side Partners in Milwaukee.

Under the original program, there was an intense focus on identifying nuisance properties to hold landlords accountable for apartments or businesses where illicit activity such as drug dealing and prostitution was taking place.

"Instead of going fully heavy-handed, what you would do is, you just reach out to the landlord, and you'd reach out to the neighbors, and you'd say, 'Hey, look, is there any way that we can address this problem up front?'" said John Chisholm, who won election in 2006 to succeed McCann as Milwaukee County's district attorney. "You've got quality of life issues going on here. As you started working with the neighbors, they actually saw a responsiveness and actual dedicated police officers who work closely with the prosecutors, with the city attorney, and with this neighborhood organization."

"It wasn't all about 'How many people are we going to round up and put in jail?' It was more like, 'Let's identify what's going on here and see if we can change some of those conditions and see if we can't actually invite the property owners, but even more so the businesses, to start thinking in terms of working together to reduce some of these problems.'"

Chisholm made expanding the community prosecutor program a linchpin of his first campaign run for district attorney, promising to roll out prosecutors in several police districts across the city. The mandate he gave the prosecutors: "You're not cookie cutters."

"You have to meet the people where they're at and identify the problems that they're experiencing," said Chisholm, who served as district attorney until 2025 and now is senior lecturer at

Marquette University Law School. "And they're going to be different depending on what part of the community you're in."

## Aiming to solve problems before they grow

So how does the program work now?

Ann Romero López, a Milwaukee County deputy district attorney who supervises the Community Partnership Unit, said the aim is "to decrease crime in the neighborhoods we serve." That doesn't just mean working with landlords on nuisance properties. It means dealing with those who cause problems in the neighborhoods. The goal isn't to prosecute more people, but oftentimes to solve problems by getting people the help they need to overcome underlying problems of drug use, mental health, and homelessness.

"We focus on more of the prolific offenders, high-value targets, if you will," said López, who worked a dozen years as a community prosecutor on the city's south side, where she was born and raised. "It's a small group of people, a minority of people, who are causing the majority of crime in certain areas."

She recalled one story from several years ago involving a McDonald's on the city's south side, where every month police were dispatched for dozens of calls for service. "As a community prosecutor, you have more time to really take a look at what is the root of the issue," she said.

There was an intense focus on making physical changes to reduce crime. Keypads were installed on the restrooms. Registers were relocated. A Wi-Fi connection was hardened. A dumpster area was changed. "They hired Milwaukee Police Department officers, working on overtime for security, who assisted in addressing the loitering and the drug dealing outside," López said.

The changes saw calls to police plummet by more than half, López said.




## Different neighborhoods, different needs

Other areas of the city call for different solutions. "Every day is different," said Dax Odom, the community prosecutor based in the police department's First District, which encompasses downtown Milwaukee. The work is important and meaningful, said Odom, a Marquette Law School graduate. The successes are built one case and one story at a time.

"It's hard to prove a negative—that, because of efforts we made, something isn't happening," Odom said. "But you hear it at community meetings, where people thank you."

One success Odom points to is the push to clean up Swing Park at Water Street under the Holton Street Bridge in the Tannery Row neighborhood, just north of downtown along the Milwaukee River.

"Three summers ago, we had a lot of issues at Swing Park," he said. "Young people were gathering en masse during the evening, causing quite a bit of property damage, shots fired in the air. A lot of people in the condos and apartments were at their wit's end."

Odom and others met with community members, talked about efforts that could be made to deal with the problems. Eventually, the park was fenced off for nearby construction. Plans are now underway to redevelop the park into a safe, secure neighborhood jewel.

Christine Caponigro, one of the community leaders, credited Odom with giving residents vital information on how to work with police and agencies. She said he is a constant presence at neighborhood meetings and also participates in community cleanups.

"These past couple of summers were the first quiet nights of summer in many years," she said. "We need to claim this space, something that is a benefit to the neighborhood."

Sam Rampulla, executive director of The Brewery Neighborhood Improvement District No. 1, said Odom "has been an amazing partner in the effort to help put a stop to some of the continued nuisances we face in our district."

In one case, Odom spent years helping the district deal with an individual who flouted court orders with aggressive panhandling and causing

disturbances. Odom had three different sets of cases with the individual, who was ultimately incarcerated.

"The name of the game with the Community Partnership Unit is in the title," he said. "It's partnership and collaboration."

### "This isn't a 9-to-5 job"

Follow O'Neill on a single day, and it's apparent that communication is a big part of the job. "This isn't a 9-to-5 job," she said, at the beginning of an 11-hour workday.

First stop: The new home for the residential treatment facility created by Meta House and located at 535 N. 39th Street. It's a chance for O'Neill and Milwaukee Police Officer Isaac King to meet with the facility's leadership—a get-acquainted session for a new neighbor.

They discuss resources in the area, including designated bicycle police officers. They go over what happens if police officers are called to the building. And O'Neill and King discuss some of the nearby challenges to be on the watch for, including drug use on a nearby main street.

"We want to be good partners with you," she tells the Meta House leadership.

Second stop: A safety strategy meeting at Near West Side Partners with property management from an apartment complex where they discuss concerns about safety at apartments in the 1800 block of West Juneau Avenue.

A recent shooting has shaken the neighborhood, adding another chapter to problems that have plagued the apartments, despite changes in management and security personnel. Management promises to make changes, including beefing up security and making repairs to damaged outer doors. They agree to a date when Near West Side Partners can set up an information booth and convene neighbors. At the agreed date, O'Neill and others will be there to distribute information, meet with residents, and engage with families.

Those actions alone won't put an end to problems. But they're a start. "Our goal is to improve the quality of life for people who live in the neighborhood," O'Neill said later.

Third stop: Meeting with top administrators at Highland Community School, a Montessori school across the street from the Juneau Avenue apartments.

The administrators want to build a relationship with O'Neill and the Community Partnership Unit, especially with increased police activity at the apartments. O'Neill offers advice on how to get information quickly as police activity unfolds. When asked how police might meet with parents at the school, she suggests setting up a table for officers at a back-to-school night event.

Last stop: Back at the Third District station for a dinnertime meeting with community members, to go over monthly crime figures with the district's top police leadership and to hear of any concerns residents may have.

In an interview, Milwaukee Police Captain Raymond Bratchett, the Third District commander, called O'Neill the "cream of the crop." "Having the community prosecutor in our district is truly invaluable," he said. "I think it definitely strengthens the relationship between the justice system and our community."

"Kelly is a wealth of information. She's been here longer than I have," he added, emphasizing the relationships she has built with residents over the years. "She sees some of the crimes that are impacting our neighborhood, and it really helps, particularly when it comes to charging, to know you're doing this to benefit this person, to benefit this neighborhood."

In a recent year, O'Neill and others with the unit participated in neighborhood cleanups, a park opening, a gunlock event, and a turkey giveaway. She reviewed cases and warrants with officers and followed up on cases and concerns expressed by residents and police.

Key cases included getting a restraining order against a serial trespasser at a Milwaukee Housing Authority location. Another involved dealing with repeated thefts at a local pharmacy and staying on top of the case as the accused individual made his way through the court system. There also was intense monitoring of problem properties, including scheduling meetings between residents and owners of the properties so they could talk through issues.

"The beauty of the job," O'Neill said, is that it can be tailored to each district and its current problems, whether burglaries, car thefts, or other issues.

"You have to be dependable," she said. "If you say you're going to be somewhere, you have to be there."

And you have to listen. Only then can O'Neill or her colleagues say, "I hear you. And we're going to figure out how we can address this." ■

*Bill Glauber is a retired daily newspaper journalist who has covered a wide range of stories in Milwaukee, across Wisconsin, and around the world.*

**"Having the community prosecutor in our district is truly invaluable. I think it definitely strengthens the relationship between the justice system and our community."**

**— Raymond Bratchett, Milwaukee Police Department captain**