



MELINDA KATZ DISTRICT ATTORNEY

FOR THE DA'S WEEKLY EBLAST,
EMAIL REQUESTS TO
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A Message from District Attorney

MELINDA KATZ

OUR DISCOVERY LAWS

I joined my fellow New York City prosecutors in support of Gov. Kathy Hochul's plan to tweak our discovery laws to make our criminal justice system fairer and more efficient.

In a joint letter published by the Times Union, we shared our concerns that far too many cases are being dismissed on minor technical grounds and delays have increased, undermining the public's trust in our judicial system since the new discovery law changes were implemented in 2020.

Gov. Hochul's proposed amendments to the discovery laws will create a path forward to rectify these issues. Prosecutors are required to present the defense with discovery – evidence against a defendant. This discovery has increased exponentially with the advent of body-worn camera footage, electronic files and more. It can take weeks and even months for prosecutors to fulfill the discovery requirements.

Gov. Hochul's proposal narrows the requirements for some material and this could help move cases forward faster while safeguarding victims' rights and still ensuring fairness and transparency.

In Friendship,

STAY CONNECTED



REPUTED TREN DE ARAGUA GUN TRAFFICKING RING DISMANTLED

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz, joined by Police Commissioner Jessica S. Tisch, announced the takedown of a gun trafficking ring operated by reputed members of the Tren de Aragua gang. Ten alleged members of the Venezuelan street gang are variously charged in a 120-count indictment with selling guns throughout Queens, other New York City areas, in an operation that extended as far away as Texas and Colorado.

A long-term investigation led to 34 illegal firearms being seized by law enforcement, including two AR-15 assault weapons. One of these assault-style weapons was allegedly sold in broad daylight in a popular shopping center parking lot in College Point. Another was wrapped in a garbage bag and traded for cash in the middle of the afternoon in the Bronx.

These alleged gang members are also accused of selling a drug cocktail known as tusi or "pink cocaine." Undercover investigators were able to buy 48 grams of the specialty drug that is a combination of MDMA and ketamine that is dyed pink. The sellers vouched for the quality of the product telling their buyers that they used the product themselves.

But this ring was primarily a gun-running operation with firearms being sold for anywhere from \$1,200 to \$2,800. The participants discussed expanding their money-making venture to other regions, too, including Colombia.

DA Katz said, "The geographic scope

of their alleged conduct extended on a national level to include Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas and internationally to Colombia. As a result of our investigation, 34 dangerous weapons are now off the streets and we are dismantling this gang as it attempts to establish itself locally."

During the arrests of three defendants, a court-authorized search of one of the defendant's vehicles resulted in the recovery of two loaded semiautomatic pistols. Another two semiautomatic firearms were seized during the arrests of two other reputed gang members.

The defendants are variously charged with criminal sale of a firearm, criminal possession of a firearm, criminal possession of a weapon, criminal sale of a controlled substance, attempted criminal sale of a firearm and criminal possession of a controlled substance, as well as conspiracy.



SEEKING JUSTICE IN COLD CASE HOMICIDE



DA Katz recently released surveillance video in the shooting death of an off-duty correction officer, who was killed during a traffic jam outside of a house party in Springfield Gardens in August 2020.

No one has been held accountable for this crime. The DA is asking that anyone who has any information to come forward to give the mother and loved ones of the victim closure.

John Jeff was a 28-year-old correction officer and was the passenger in a black Chevy Malibu. Around 3 a.m. on August 15, 2020, the driver of the Malibu was blocked from going forward by a garbage truck. Jeff got out of the car, identified himself as a correction officer and displayed his firearm. That's when Jeff became embroiled in a verbal dispute trying to convince motorists blocking them to back up on the residential street.

One car backed up, allowing the Chevy Malibu to move, but the vehicle was blocked again by a white Infiniti. At this point, someone tapped on Jeff's window, he exited the vehicle and a second argument ensued. Moments later at the intersection of Defoe and Ridgedale streets, Jeff was shot numerous times, including one wound to the victim's head.

He was taken to a nearby hospital, but was pronounced dead at 3:37 a.m.

DA Katz said, "Although cases grow cold, they are never forgotten. We hope that by publicly releasing this surveillance footage we will bring more attention to this senseless, unsolved murder. I urge anyone with any information regarding the August 15, 2020, homicide of John Jeff to come forward."

Tips can be offered anonymously via 800-577-TIPS. NYPD Crimestoppers is offering a \$30,000 reward.

CASES OF INTEREST

A defendant who pleaded guilty to a violent, broad daylight rape and assault of a woman on the rooftop of a Jamaica apartment building, was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Jerson Vasquez pleaded guilty to rape, attempted murder and another charge for luring a woman from a Facebook Marketplace ad to the location in August 2023.

Vasquez, 25, slammed the victim's head into a cement wall, choked and repeatedly punched the woman in addition to the rape, causing extensive injuries and trauma.

In another case, a Bronx woman was sentenced to 18 years in prison for killing the passenger of a ride share vehicle. Melissa Rodriguez-Lopez, 29, was driving at 123 mph when she rear-ended a Toyota on the Whitestone Expressway in May 2023.

The defendant was racing other motorists around 3 a.m. when she struck the Uber, killing a 62-year-old man in the backseat. Rodriguez-Lopez pleaded guilty to manslaughter and assault in January.



CELEBRATING THE LUNAR NEW YEAR

To help ring in the Year of the Snake, DA Katz marched in the annual Lunar New Year Parade in Flushing with members of the Queens District

Attorney's staff. She also attended a special Lunar New Year celebration at Resorts World in South Ozone Park.



COMMEMORATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

DA Katz celebrated the office's annual Black History Month program at the Black Spectrum Theatre in Jamaica with musical performances, dancers and a step team presentation.

During the commemoration, the DA honored

DC37 President Shaun Francois, activist Michelle Dunston and two members of the Queens DA's office, Supervising ADA Nicole Reid and Executive Assistant Kechia Kingston.

