



**Gina DeGenova**

## **Mahoning County Prosecuting Attorney**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**January 25, 2024**

**MAHONING COUNTY PROSECUTOR GINA DEGENOVA ANNOUNCES LAUNCH  
OF SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT (SVU)**

**PRESS CONFERENCE TO BE HELD:**

**Date: January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**Time: 1:00 PM**

**Place: Mahoning County Court House, Commissioners Hearing Room, 120 Market Street  
Youngstown, Ohio 44503**

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Mahoning County Prosecutor Gina DeGenova is proud to announce the implementation of a new Special Victims Unit of the Mahoning County Prosecutor's Office. The Special Victims Unit (SVU) will be staffed by Assistant Mahoning County Prosecutors devoted to seeking justice for vulnerable victim groups.

The SVU will handle,

- Sexual assaults;
- Domestic violence and domestic homicides;
- Crimes against children including child endangering and child pornography;
- Human trafficking;
- Crimes against individuals with developmental disabilities;
- Elder abuse, physical and financial; and
- Animal cruelty.

“I am always looking to impose best practices. Adding a specialized unit will help ensure the protection of the most vulnerable members of our community,” said Prosecutor DeGenova. “I am especially pleased that career prosecutor Jennifer McLaughlin Bonish will serve as Chief of the SVU. Chief Bonish has extensive experience in prosecuting sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse cases in Mahoning County. In her 18 years as an attorney, she has prosecuted numerous criminal jury trials and secured the first jury verdict finding a defendant

guilty of Human Trafficking. Chief Bonish is also passionate about animal welfare, recognizing that animals lack the ability to protect themselves from their abusers.”

Joining Chief Bonish is a team of experienced assistant prosecutors including Caitlyn Andrews and Kevin Day, along with our new additions, Katie Jones and Daniel Yozwiak. Each of these Assistant Prosecutors shares the passion for seeking justice and protecting these vulnerable groups within our community.

### **Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence and Human Trafficking**

A distinguishing feature of the SVU will be vertical prosecution, meaning that the same prosecutors will handle the cases from pre-indictment through sentencing. Many incidents of physical and sexual abuse are not reported to law enforcement. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five women will be raped in their lives. However, a staggering 63% of sexual assaults are never reported to police. The report rate is even lower when the victim is a child, with only 12% of child sexual assaults being reported to law enforcement<sup>1</sup>.

Through the SVU’s vertical prosecution model, victims will know who their prosecutors are early in the process. They will know who to contact with questions and concerns as their cases move through the criminal justice system. Furthermore, vertical prosecution spares victims the trauma of describing their victimization to numerous prosecutors in various stages of prosecution. The SVU prosecutors are prepared to address the specific needs of these victims during the criminal justice process.

### **Crimes Against the Elderly**

Alarming statistics consistently demonstrate the need for the SVU to encompass crimes against elderly victims. The United States Department of Justice reported in 2023 that 10% of adults in the United States over 60 years of age are victims of elder abuse each year with two-thirds of those victims being women. Elderly victims are particularly vulnerable to call center scams, reporting more losses in such scams in 2022 than all other age groups combined. Only 1 in 24 cases of elder abuse is reported to law enforcement. In cases of financial abuse by a friend or family member, 87.5% of elderly victims did not report their victimization<sup>2</sup>.

### **Animal Cruelty**

Turning to the protection of animals, the link between abuse of animals in the home and the abuse of family or household members is well established. As the Animal Legal Defense Fund explained, “violence is violence; and those who commit violence rarely limit their victim pool to a single species.” When animal cruelty takes place in a home, it is more likely that other family members are being abused. In fact, animal abuse is one of the top four risk factors for domestic violence. Domestic abusers also commonly use animals to instill fear in their victims or to prevent their victims from leaving their abusive situations. In homes where domestic violence is occurring, 50% of children reported that their abusers threatened to hurt or kill a pet. Approximately one-third of battered women have remained with their abusers for longer because

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<sup>1</sup> "Animal Cruelty's Link to Other Forms of Violence." National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015. <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>.

<sup>2</sup> "Elder Abuse Special Feature." Office of Justice Programs. U.S. Department of Justice, June 6, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e567382012-001>.

they feared for their animals<sup>3</sup>. By prosecuting animal cruelty cases, the SVU will protect entire families.

In Mahoning County, Animal Charity of Ohio's Humane Department investigates cases of suspected animal abuse. Historically, Animal Charity, a non-profit organization, has paid a special prosecutor from outside the county to handle Misdemeanor level animal cruelty cases. Prosecutor DeGenova will now make her SVU prosecutors available to prosecute both Misdemeanor and Felony animal cruelty offenses, alleviating that expenditure for Animal Charity and allowing the humane agents to allocate their resources elsewhere. To further the investigative capabilities of Animal Charity's three Humane Agents, Prosecutor DeGenova has secured funding from the Mahoning County Commissioners for body cameras that will capture the scenes agents encounter.

Chief Bonish anticipates that the SVU will have a significant impact in Mahoning County. "The SVU is an opportunity for our office to prioritize seeking justice for our community's most vulnerable victims", remarks Bonish. "Special victims need prosecutors who are prepared to deal with the unique issues presented in these types of cases. Some of these victims cannot speak for themselves in court, but they deserve to have their abusers held accountable for their crimes. Hopefully, the existence of a select group of Assistant Mahoning County Prosecutors devoted to handling such cases will encourage victims who are suffering abuse as well as citizens who may witness abuse to come forward and disclose."

### **Thank You to Our Community Partners**

One of the keys to the Special Victims Unit's success will be community partnerships. The SVU prosecutors will continue to work with Mahoning County Children's Services Board, the Child Advocacy Center at Akron Children's Hospital, and law enforcement agencies across Mahoning County to help ensure the safety of children in our community. Prosecutor DeGenova and the SVU will also collaborate with Mahoning County Board of Developmental Disabilities, COMPASS Family & Community Services, Direction Home of Eastern Ohio, and Animal Charity of Ohio. "We cannot express enough appreciation for the hard work and dedication of our community partners. Without their support our office and the SVU would not be able to achieve our mission to protect families and ensure justice is served," said Prosecutor DeGenova. Community partners and members of the new unit will be in attendance at the press conference on January 29<sup>th</sup>.

Prosecutor DeGenova and the SVU prosecutors are eager to embark on this mission to protect the most vulnerable citizens of Mahoning County!

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<sup>3</sup> "Animal Cruelty's Link to Other Forms of Violence." Animal Legal Defense Fund. Animal Legal Defense Fund, October 1, 2024. <https://aldf.org/article/the-link-between-cruelty-to-animals-and-violence-toward-humans-2/>.