



Steve Cooley, Los Angeles County District Attorney

[by Nikki LaCrosse]

Being the District Attorney of Los Angeles is a busy, complex job and one that has been done by some larger-than-life lawyers. In the past five years the current D.A., Steve Cooley, has found that the big chair fits him just fine.

When Cooley took office, the LAPD Rampart scandal was still very much on the minds of the voters, and Cooley made it one of his first goals to address the underlying problems. "There was some sense that the D.A.'s office didn't play enough of a role in exercising independent prosecutorial oversight," Cooley says. "I wanted to get more focus and accountability."

He first took the Special Investigations Department (SID) and broke it up into the Public Integrity Division (PID) and the Justice System Integrity Division (JSID). Cooley explains that he split up the department to improve their effectiveness. "They weren't doing a good job about public corruption and public integrity investigation," Cooley says. "They never seemed to be able to put a case together in that sphere. By the same token, that's because the unit was maybe charged with an election code violation one day and an officer-involved shooting the next day. I felt by creating the Public Integrity Division, I gave those assigned people—lawyers and investigators—a clear mission."

Cooley also increased the reach of the new JSID. "I broadened their scope beyond just front-line law enforcement police officers to include anyone in the justice system who violates their oath as part of that system and commits a criminal act. That could be a clerk in the courts; it could be a judge; it could be a police officer—those are the bulk of our cases—or it could be an attorney." Cooley notes that the involvement of his office in corrupt-attorney cases is a first for L.A. County. "Historically, our office didn't get involved in those cases. They sort of

kissed off the State Bar. We now have three attorneys who do nothing but [deal with] corrupt lawyers. We've convicted a number of them."

Part of the overhaul has included new procedures for local law enforcement agencies. "As part of the JSID, we got all front-line law enforcement to agree to protocols for the reinstated rollout program and protocols for referring allegations of a criminality against their police officers at a relatively early state of the investigation," Cooley says. "They've all signed those protocols. That's gotten us more or less the front end so we can see if there are any patterns of criminal activity within an agency, within a certain police division or sheriff's station."

Cooley notes that the new division and new protocols have had a positive effect on the relationship between law enforcement and the D.A.'s office. "The vast majority of law enforcement are honest people who are dedicated to their profession," Cooley states. "There is nothing that an honest police officer hates more than one who violates the oath and is dishonest. So, I think that them knowing we are doing our job effectively is not only a deterrent, it adds confidence to what they're doing."

Cooley has a bit of a law enforcement background himself. The son of an FBI veteran, he joined the LAPD reservist program in law school and patrolled the streets for six years. "I must tell you I thoroughly enjoyed that experience," Cooley says. "It was fun. It was exciting. It was a great learning experience. I met a lot of good people."

Cooley also feels that his experience has helped him in his job as D.A. "I think that experience of working the streets—dealing with the people, victims, the officers—when you're out there trying to gather evidence— it gives you a certain perspective that you might not otherwise have if you didn't have that life experience. I think I appreciate the challenges of what police officers are up against, perhaps more sensitively than others might."

Cooley has spent his entire legal career in the Los Angeles District Attorney's office. "I graduated from USC Law in 1973, took the '73 bar, and in two weeks was hired by the D.A.'s office as a law clerk. I've never left the organization," he notes. A native Angeleno, Cooley and his wife have raised a son and daughter and have been married for more than 30 years. In his rare downtime, Cooley enjoys vacationing with his family in Lake Arrowhead (CA) and doing yard work. But he admits that his job keeps his days full. "The job takes up a lot of my time," he admits. "It's not a bad thing, but it's consuming."

Another high-profile project run by Cooley's office is earning high marks from educators and law enforcement agencies around the country. Protect Our Kids is aimed at educating parents, teachers, and kids about the potential dangers of using the Internet.

Cooley explains how the program got started. "There were certain cases out there that we were prosecuting, where it was clear that the young person had been victimized because of inappropriate activities on the Internet; or in the alternative, they were committing



crimes by inappropriate use of the Internet. So the people over there at crime prevention saw this and put together, I think, a very, very effective program to help parents help their kids avoid those problems."

A software program that tracks Internet use is a key part of the program. "The way they did it was to come up with a program and engage a private vendor to give this Internet program away for free," Cooley notes, "And then going out to different PTAs and saying, 'Look, this is a potentially harmful to your kids, and here is a way to help them.'" Cooley also comments that the program is growing. "We're going to be expanding that outreach into parochial schools, private schools, and maybe Boys and Girls Clubs, and maybe DARE America. We're very proud of the program."

On the prosecutorial end of electronic crime, Cooley's office is working hard to stay abreast of the latest technologies and the crimes that come with them. "We have stepped up and expanded our whole electronic crimes task force efforts and our identity theft efforts," Cooley says. "This is through a lot more training and a lot more exposure in law enforcement to what is out there in terms of electronic crimes and investigations."

Currently, a major and immediate goal for Cooley is implementing Prop 69, the controversial felony DNA database that was

approved by California voters in November 2004. "It is the best of all convicted-felon, DNA-database laws in the country. There is no doubt in my mind," Cooley says. "That being said, you still have to implement it. In L.A. County, that means implementing it for the about 38% of all convicted felons [in California] that come out of L.A. County, who go through the largest sheriff's department, and LAPD, which is probably the third-largest police department in the country, and then 45 other municipal law enforcement agencies. You need to get them all working according to some procedures and protocols to make sure we maximize the obtaining of those samples for inclusion in the state's DNA database."

According to Cooley, the D.A.'s get the testing orders as soon as a person is convicted of a felony. From there, the person's DNA is tested and logged into the database as a digital code. He dismisses privacy concerns about what other information may be revealed about a person through his/her DNA. "All you get after the DOJ [Department of Justice] tests that sample is a digitized code saying 'Steve Cooley—and here's his digitized code.' There is no other information that is tested for, looked at, examined, recorded, or memorialized. So, I think those concerns were exaggerated by the ACLU and others, and certainly some groups that don't particularly like law enforcement in general were opposed to it."

Cooley maintains that the new, expanded database will lead to a slew of convictions. "I tell you, it's predictable. Once those profiles are tested and uploaded to the DNA database, you're going to see cold case and forcible rape cases, homicide cases, and some other cases—child molestation cases—being solved by the truckload," Cooley states. "But we have to do the groundwork by getting the samples taken. It's a massive undertaking."

As for the future, Cooley is leaving his options open. "There were a lot of people who encouraged me to run for the Attorney General's office in this last race," he says. "I listened attentively, but you know what? I just got hired to do a job for four years by the people in L.A. County. And it's something that I like doing, and it's something that if I was out running around trying to be AG—it is something that I would miss doing, predictably. So, I declined various overtures to consider that."

He adds, "Right now, my goal is to finish this term. I have three more years on this term. And the future is what the future is. I'll sort of decide if I'm going to hang around here for a third time or go off and do something else sometime in the future."