



From left, Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson, Chief Defender Lynn Pride Richardson, Unlocking DOORS President Christina Melton Crain, Sheriff Lupe Valdez, and Chief Renee Hall.

LOCAL NEWS

Examining Criminal Justice in Dallas With DPD's Chief, the D.A., the Sheriff, and Chief Defender

Four of the most important people in Dallas public safety converged for a discussion on Friday. What emerged was a nuanced portrait of criminal justice in the city.

BY [MATT GOODMAN](#) PUBLISHED IN [FRONTBURNER](#) SEPTEMBER 22, 2017 4:30 PM

Police associations were excited to learn that the new Dallas police chief, U. Renee Hall, went on patrol calls in Detroit, where she served as a deputy chief. It was a good sign someone that high up hit the streets like a rank-and-file. It's been years since the Dallas Police Department has seen that. Seated before about 200 people at the Belo Mansion for a 90-minute panel on Friday morning, Hall detailed the importance of meeting officers face-to-face, of shaking hands and giving hugs and asking about their families. It's her way of fixing the department's much publicized morale problem—by being present, both as chief and colleague.

“You want to know what they feel, what they actually need in order to do their jobs better,” Hall said. “I want them to be whole. I know if they're not whole, then I can't get the best out of them in order to engage the community.”

Hall is among the city's most important criminal justice officials, four of whom were present for the panel. Joining her were Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson, Sheriff Lupe Valdez, and Chief Defender Lynn Pride Richardson. Together, they make up a “female Mount Rushmore” of Dallas criminal justice, as moderator and event organizer Christina Melton Crain put it. Crain is a former chair of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and is now the president and CEO of Unlocking DOORS, an agency that helps resettle recently released prisoners. Friday's panel was part of its daylong seminar on public safety.

The discussion focused on the participants' gender, but also delved into issues of female representation and the role of empathy in the justice system. There was what could be construed as a light barb [against a former district attorney](#) over the use of county funds (Johnson took all 269 prosecutors to lunch over the course of six months, and stated that she didn't use the county's money to pay for it), a healthy back-and-forth over the disparity in the number of investigators in the district attorney's office (which has 81) in comparison to the public defender's (which has 17). The panelists spoke of the need to provide services to residents who need them, the relationship between drug addiction and poverty to crime, and the concern that ongoing housing shortages and pockmarked background checks will continue the cycle of criminality. Jail, they argued, is not always the answer.

“If we don't get resources to these folks, then all we're doing is recycling them, ladies and gentlemen,” Richardson said.

What emerged was a picture of progress. Valdez spoke of winning her seat 13 years ago and having to deal with the media writing about what she's wearing. “When Chief came in, they never mentioned that. That's advancement,” she said. “The balance

(between men and women) that you see now in criminal justice is what has been lacking.”

But there are serious resource questions here. Hall acknowledged the police shortage, and said it was the most pressing challenge facing her. Richardson expressed the difficulty in overseeing a public defender’s office that saw 45,000 cases last year with only 116 attorneys and 17 investigators. (Johnson defended her office’s 81 investigators by saying the prosecution has “the burden of proof.”) Johnson also called for open discovery, as the state of Texas allows the prosecution to hand over evidence just before trial. She said she believes the state’s case should be out in the open, so that there is no doubt of a person’s guilt if they are convicted.

Valdez noted that the Dallas County Jail has a population higher than 80 percent of Texas’ towns. She said we shouldn’t be putting so many people in jail.

“Jails are for people we’re afraid of,” she said, “not for people who we’re upset with.”

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