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DALLAS SYMPOSIUM

Women relish their roles in criminal justice

Police chief, sheriff, DA, defender talk of trust, proving themselves

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U. Renee Hall didn't expect so much attention when she moved to Dallas to become the city's first female police chief.

"I thought I was going to be the police chief, and I think I turned into some type of icon overnight," Hall said Friday at a criminal justice symposium.

She said being the first woman to lead Dallas' police force is nothing more than an opportunity to show that it's no longer a "male-dominated role" and anyone can be the best-qualified for the job, re-

gardless of race or gender.

Hall joined Sheriff Lupe Valdez, District Attorney Faith Johnson and Dallas County Chief Public Defender Lynn Pride Richardson to discuss what it means to be a woman in charge in the criminal justice system.

The event at Belo Mansion was hosted by Dallas-based nonprofit Unlocking Doors, which pairs ex-offenders with

housing, mental health, rehabilitation and job services.

Women make up about 14 percent of the Texas jail population. Last year, there were 5,670 women behind bars in the state, a number that has increased 44 percent since 2011.

But women still make up a small percentage of law enforcement officers: 11.5 percent, according to a 2015

analysis. Dallas County's top law enforcers said those who work in the criminal justice system should mirror the demographics of the general population.

"The biggest issue is making sure the police department is reflective of the larger community," Hall said.

Studies have shown fe-

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David Woo/Staff Photographer

Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson (from left), public defender Lynn Pride Richardson, Unlocking Doors CEO Christina Melton Crain, Sheriff Lupe Valdez and Police Chief U. Renee Hall took part in Friday's symposium at Belo Mansion.

What it means to be a woman in criminal justice

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male officers are less likely to get into physical confrontations with suspects. Valdez and Hall said women might approach a law enforcement situation differently than men, and that can help improve community and police relationships.

"If the community does not see themselves in law enforcement, there's going to be no trust," Valdez said.

Part of the trust begins within the criminal justice organizations. Hall said she wants to meet her officers and listen to their needs to help them work better with the community. Valdez said she requires all of her employees to see a counselor if they've been involved in a traumatic situation.

Johnson said she has taken

"I had to prove myself more than anyone who had come before me."

Lynn Pride Richardson, Dallas County chief public defender

all of the 269 prosecutors in the district attorney's office to lunch so they feel comfortable talking to her. She said she has little time to think about being the first black woman to run the district attorney's office, because she "had to hit the ground running" after she was appointed in December.

Each woman said she's faced more scrutiny of her work than men who have held similar positions.

"I had to prove myself more than anyone who had come before me," said Richardson, the first black woman to be a chief public defender in Texas. "In

some instances, we had to work a little harder than our male counterparts."

Valdez joked that when she started, it was a novelty to be a female sheriff. "In the sheriff's conference, there was never a line to the women's bathroom — finally."

She said when she was first elected, many news reports covered her clothing, something she didn't expect. But she said she was pleased to see that in all the media coverage of Hall, there hasn't been mention of her clothing.

"Ah, advancement," Valdez said.

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