



DOUGLAS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

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District Attorney Suzanne Valdez's Statement on Resuming Jury Trials

Lawrence, Kan. – On March 18, 2021, the Douglas County District Court issued a news release regarding its plans to start hearing jury trials in April.

Within the news release, the following quote was attributed to Chief District Court Judge James McCabria: "If we didn't believe we could provide a safe, secure and fair location for jury trials, we would not ask the public or the parties to participate. *We've consulted with all of the stakeholders, we've sought guidance from health experts throughout the pandemic, and we are confident that whether a trial occurs at the judicial center or at the fairgrounds, this district is fully capable of resuming this important function for the community.*" (Emphasis added.)

The District Attorney's Office was not consulted and is undoubtedly a stakeholder. Importantly, had I or my office been consulted by the District Court, we would have shared our concerns about holding trials during the COVID pandemic, as well as trying high level felony cases at the Douglas County Fairgrounds in a makeshift courthouse where security is not guaranteed.

On November 16, 2020, the Election Canvass was held. The results confirmed that I would be the next Douglas County District Attorney. On December 7, 2020, absent input from the State and defense bar or so much as any notice to me as the District Attorney-Elect, the Court released a 10-page document containing a list of jury trials, scheduled to begin on January 11, 2021 – the day I was to be sworn in as District Attorney. Due to COVID concerns, jury trials have not yet commenced, and the jury trial schedule has been continued on a month-to-month basis.

The District Court has now announced to the public that jury trials will commence in April. Again, this decision was made without consulting my office. As District Attorney, it is my duty to protect and ensure public safety. While conducting jury trials is an important function of the criminal justice system, I do not believe that conducting jury trials is prudent during a pandemic when a large majority of the Douglas County community has not been vaccinated. It is also my position that jury trials should commence only at such time when they can be held in the Judicial & Law Enforcement Center where proper security is available to the parties and the public.

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