

Chief State's Attorney Colangelo Talks Balance and Goals



Around town, Richard J. Colangelo Jr. is known as a father of four, frequently seen attending his kids' school and sports activities, and as Easton Police Commission chairman.

Across the state, he's known for prosecuting the case of Jennifer Dulos, missing New Canaan mother of five, whose estranged husband, Fotis Dulos, was charged with her murder. He died following a suicide attempt in January. Finding Dulos remains a high priority for Colangelo, who vows not to give up the investigation until she is found.

Colangelo was sworn in as Chief State's Attorney, Connecticut's top law enforcement officer, on Jan. 31. He is the administrative head of the Division of Criminal Justice, an independent agency in the executive branch of state government. The agency employs 450 people at its Rocky Hill headquarters and regional offices. As Chief State's Attorney, he is responsible for the investigation and prosecution of all criminal matters in Connecticut.



The John M. Bailey Office of the Chief State's Attorney in Rocky Hill. — Nancy Doniger Photo

The Criminal Justice Commission was unanimous in its conclusion that Colangelo was the right choice for the job, according to Supreme Court Justice Andrew McDonald, who chairs the commission and swore Colangelo into office.

“The Chief State's Attorney is the most important position that the commission can fill,” McDonald said. “Not only does it require a supremely skilled prosecutor, but it also requires somebody with a deep knowledge of the Division of Criminal Justice and the skills to manage a large government agency that spans 13 jurisdiction around the state.

“We were very fortunate that a large number of individuals applied for the position and ultimately the commission interviewed five finalists at the Legislative Office Building in

late January,” McDonald said. “It was a very competitive group of candidates, all of whom would have been able to discharge the responsibility of the position well. It was a very tough decision.”

Colangelo is the eighth person to hold the title of Chief State’s Attorney since the position was established in 1973. He will serve the remainder of the five-year term to which Kevin T. Kane was appointed as Chief State’s Attorney in 2016. Kane retired after 47 years as a prosecutor, the last 13 as Chief State’s Attorney.



Portrait of former Chief State's Attorney Kevin T. Kane who recently retired after 47 years as a prosecutor. His staff commissioned the photo as a gift to their former chief. — Nancy Doniger Photo

The Criminal Justice Commission is responsible for the appointment of all state prosecutors in Connecticut. In addition to McDonald, its membership includes Superior Court Judge Melanie L. Cradle, attorneys Robert M. Berke, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Scott J. Murphy and Moy N. Ogilvie.

A career prosecutor, Colangelo joined the Criminal Justice Division in March 1993 and served in various capacities until his appointment as State's Attorney for the Judicial District of Stamford/Norwalk on July 1, 2015. He has tried all types of major felony cases and has been intricately involved in criminal investigations and criminal justice education.

Colangelo graduated from Norwalk State Technical College, the University of Connecticut and the Quinnipiac School of Law, and has taught in the Connecticut community college system, the University of New Haven and the National Computer Forensics Institute in Hoover, Alabama.

He is chairman of the State Board of Examiners for Psychologists, chairman of the Easton Police Commission, president of the Human Services Council Board of Directors in Norwalk, a member of the Boys and Girls Club of Redding-Easton Board of Directors, and a member of the Eyewitness Identification Task Force.

In his new role, Colangelo said he plans "to see how I can move the criminal division forward. Just because we've done something in the past doesn't mean we have to do things the same way in the future. One thing is the division has never collected data on what we do, how we handle the cases. The new case management system will allow us to do that. There's a lot of exciting things going on in the division."

The Chief State's Attorney is a member of the Sentencing Commission and many state commissions working on criminal justice reform. "What we should do is look at what's out there and make a determination for what's right for Connecticut and our cases here," Colangelo said. "It's sad that police and prosecutors get bashed for what they do

every day in every jurisdiction when they go into court and do what they think is in the best interest of the people involved.”

He will examine the length of sentences, bail reform and mass incarceration from different perspectives with an eye toward balancing the rights of crime victims with the rights of defendants and the effect of law enforcement on their families and society.

He will also investigate the causes of increased gun violence in the state’s large cities in order to determine the best ways to reduce it.

According to McDonald, “One of the things that was particularly important was the amount of experience and dedication Attorney Colangelo has shown to involving community partners in the process of prosecutorial functions that he performed in Stamford .

“He also focused in his interview on the importance of transparency and communication. In just the few weeks he has been Chief State’s Attorney, he has demonstrated that it’s not just something he said to the commission, but it’s something he is embracing and incorporating into his daily functions.”

Two Jobs

In addition to filling the role of Chief State’s Attorney, Colangelo continues to serve as State’s Attorney for the Judicial District of Stamford/Norwalk while the search goes on for his replacement. He’s able to do it thanks to his “great staff,” he said. “Any issues that come up, they contact me. I’m there at least once a week and calling in every day to see if there are any issues. Usually there aren’t, because the staff is so good.”

In the State’s Attorney role, he continues to prosecute some notorious cases. With regard to Dulos, he was involved as soon as she was reported missing and said he will “always remain a resource” after the Criminal Justice Commission appoints his

successor.

“I don’t know how much time I’ll have to handle anything in court, but I’m a fount of information,” he said. “I was involved from the first day, and every step of the investigation came through me. Every day detectives from the State Police and the New Canaan Police Department go to work to find out where she is. That’s been the number one priority and will continue to be the number one priority until we find her.”

He said that the same detectives from the State Police Major Crime Division who investigated the Navin double murder case are involved in the Dulos case and are doing “amazing work.” They learned a lot from the first investigation that they are able to use in this investigation.

Kyle Navin, son of Jeffrey and Janet Navin who went missing from their Easton home in July 2015, was sentenced to 55 years in prison for his parents’ murders.

Colangelo additionally inherited the case of Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel and continues to sift through the enormous trove of police reports and records from the 1975 case. With the murder conviction overturned, he has to decide whether to retry Skakel, who was convicted of killing Martha Moxley, his teenage neighbor. “I’m confirming and finding witnesses and going through everything so I can present the case if we decide to do so,” he said.

The cold case of Kathleen Flynn, 11, who went missing while walking home from school in Norwalk in 1986 and was found dead the next day, is also “still mine,” he said. Maine State Police have arrested Marc Karun, a registered sex offender from Connecticut living in Maine, who is behind bars, unable to raise a \$5 million bond.

McDonald praised Colangelo’s “very strong work ethic,” and said it’s commendable that he is doing both jobs. “But he’s one human, and the position he has now is more than full time. We appreciate his extending himself in Stamford while talking on new

responsibilities.”

The commission expects to name a replacement in Stamford next month, McDonald said.

Staying Grounded

Colangelo said he will continue to chair the Easton Police Commission “as long as I’m adding value and they want me to do it. I think my perspective as State’s Attorney and now Chief State’s Attorney helps the town.”

He manages his stress amid the tremendous responsibility and pressure of his job “by hanging out with my wife and kids. That’s my center, seeing my kids grow up, watching the things they do, spending time with Carrie. I’m lucky she’s really supportive and steps up. That’s how I decompress.”

His wife, Carolyn M. Colangelo, has a big job of her own as a Workers’ Compensation Commissioner in Waterbury. Their daughter Gabrielle is a junior at Yale University, daughter Caitlin is a sophomore at Boston College, son Jake is a sophomore in Joel Barlow High School and son Zachary is in seventh grade at Helen Keller Middle School.

The family’s pets also keep him fit and centered: They have a five-year-old black Labradornamed Teddy, and a four-month-old German shepherd puppy named Thor, both of them named by Zach.

As State’s Attorney Colangelo would get late-night calls, like the 11 p.m. call informing him that Jennifer Dulos was missing and that officers needed a search warrant to start investigating the case. “That happened a lot in my old job,” he said. In his new job, the attorneys in the 13 regional districts are more likely to get the call.

“I learned a long time ago to compartmentalize things, that I can’t take it home,” Colangelo said. “Work is work, and home is home.”

And he finds enormous satisfaction from both.



The John M. Bailey Office of the Chief State’s Attorney in Rocky Hill. A portrait of the building’s namesake hangs in the foyer. — Nancy Doniger Photo