

Rice's Results

An Interview with The Honorable Kathleen M. Rice,
District Attorney, Nassau County, New York

EDITORS' NOTE Kathleen Rice assumed her current post in 2006. Prior to becoming the first woman in Long Island's history to be elected District Attorney, Rice served as an Assistant United States Attorney under Attorney General Janet Reno in the United States Department of Justice's Philadelphia office. Rice began her career as a prosecutor in the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office, before being promoted to the office's elite Homicide Bureau. Rice has been the recipient of the



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United States Inspector General's Integrity Award and the United States Attorney General's Director's Award for Superior Performance as an Assistant U.S. Attorney. Rice is the Third Vice President of the District Attorney Association of the State of New York, a member of the New York State and Nassau County Bar Associations, the National District Attorneys Association and the Board of Governors at Touro Law School, and a board member of New York Prosecutors Training Institute. She is a graduate of The Catholic University of America and Touro Law School.

After being elected as District Attorney in 2005, did you find it challenging to implement change?

I became the D.A. in a county that had the same D.A. for 30 years before me, and no matter how creative and proactive you are, there is a certain stagnation that sets in. One of the things I learned in the first four years was how to be more patient. I was taking on a very entrenched establishment – the judiciary, the defense bar, and law enforcement. Everyone had only known one D.A. I came in as a young woman and trying to be so proactive ruffled a few feathers. But you have to be willing to take the heat to get things done.

The epidemic around drunk driving has been a key focus for you. What type of impact have you had in that area?

We've had enormous successes, but this is a war, and we have not won it yet. Every year, we have over 4,000 DWI arrests. Out of those arrests, about a third of them had done it before.

So one of the first things I did was change the plea policy. We now prosecute these cases, and by holding people accountable, you send

the message that drunk driving will not be tolerated.

We tried a DWI double fatality, where a guy who was three times the legal limit was driving the wrong way on the Meadowbrook Parkway and smashed into a limousine bringing a family back from a wedding. The case was charged as a depraved indifference to murder, we got a conviction, and it sent a very strong message. In the aftermath of that, we went to our legislators in Albany with the message that there was a serious deficiency in

the penal law, and we created two new laws that got passed very quickly. I have brought such a level of attention to this issue that the police department has now made it a priority, and they have stepped up enforcement. As a result, we've cut the number of fatalities on the road almost in half in the past four years.

Additionally, we started an educational program in our high schools called Choices and Consequences, and it has been enormously successful in raising awareness.

You are also very focused on addressing public corruption issues in the county. What successes have you had in that area?

Nassau County is no different than a lot of other counties. Corruption is endemic. It can happen in private embezzlement cases or in private companies, as much as by public employees taking advantage of the public trust placed in them.

To battle this, I first instituted a policy in my office that I don't take money for my campaigns from people who work for me. I don't allow anyone in my office to get involved in any political activity. That ensures that my office has the integrity and credibility that a D.A.'s office needs to investigate corruption cases.

Early on, after arresting five employees from the building department in the town of North Hempstead, we passed the knowledge we got from prosecuting this case to other agencies to help prevent this kind of systemic corruption. These cases proved that we were going to hold people accountable and told the taxpayer that we were not going to let their money line the pockets of corrupt individuals.

You've been very focused on going after sexual predators online. Have you gotten the type of results you are looking for in that area?

It's a major priority for me. The first priority is to make sure we educate our children and our parents, and we've done that. We've also focused on legislation, because laws have to catch up to the crimes we now see, like identity theft, Internet scams, and sexual predators. We've also instituted a team of investigators posing as young children online, who eventually meet and arrest pedophiles who think they're meeting a young child. We have a 100 percent conviction rate on those cases.

You also created a unit dedicated specifically to the investigation of Medicaid fraud. How big of an issue is this?

It's an enormous problem. One of the single biggest expenses that our state government has is Medicaid, and that expense gets passed down to the counties – we're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars. I pushed to get a grant from New York State to start the first ever Medicaid Fraud Unit. After we created that unit, the Attorney General formed a partnership to set standards for the State Attorney General working with the local D.A.'s offices to share information and resources, and root out fraud. We've been very successful. In November, I participated in a press conference with Senator Schumer where he recommended that money be put aside in the health care bill for the investigation of Medicaid fraud, because if you are not going to be serious about preventing fraud, then you're just throwing good money after bad.

How critical is community engagement within your role, and in the department, is it important for your people to have that drive to give back?

Community engagement is absolutely essential. I believe very strongly that crime reduction has to involve communities. I can do all that I can do, but without community interest in maintaining their economic prosperity, safety, and educational level, it's very difficult to maintain any gains.

With all the management responsibility in this role, do you miss being able to dive deeply into specific cases?

I do, but trying cases at the pace I was trying them is definitely for the young. I still get involved and meet with victims in cases to assure them that I'm hearing their concerns, because that is what it is about. You can never make the victim whole again, but you can try to achieve some level of justice for them. ●