

The District Attorney and the county Sheriff have major roles and responsibilities within the criminal justice system. Below, please find an excellent summary of those responsibilities as compiled by our partner and allied organization the Interfaith Justice Committee:

Sheriff

There are 14 Sheriff Departments in the Commonwealth, one for each county. Sheriff elections are held every 6 years, and in the last election, over 670,000 ballots left the sheriff selection blank.

The sheriff's **primary responsibility is the welfare of those incarcerated in the county jail**, which includes:

- Medical concerns
- Educational programming
- Preparation for reentry into society when they have completed their sentence
- Prisoner access to visitors and attorneys
- Telephone access to families and related costs
- Access to voting

The Sheriff also makes key decisions about undocumented individuals and their treatment by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).

District Attorney

The District Attorney is an elected official and the chief law enforcement officer of the county. S/he serves a four year term. Over 72% of DA elections are uncontested. DAs have a very wide range of discretion in:

- Whether a suspect is charged
- What charges are brought
- Setting bail
- Confiscating property – even prior to a conviction
- What sentence to recommend
- Whether a suspect can be offered an alternative to criminal charges – i.e., counseling, etc.
- Whether plea-bargaining will be offered

This can have an enormous impact on a suspect's life: they may be released without a charge, they may sit in jail for months awaiting trial, or they may be charged with a wide range of crimes, completely at the DA's discretion. A conviction has lifelong implications – it can affect their ability to get a job, or a drivers' license, or to vote. These decisions have historically been applied quite differently to different populations: compared to the (mostly white) general population, Black and Latino people are charged and brought to trial at a greater rate and receive longer sentences for the same/similar crimes.