The Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission would be the last crime-fighting group to crow about the many wins it has helped engineer through its 33-year history. The commission, after all, prefers to thrive quietly behind the scenes, where it builds task forces from members of different law enforcement agencies to investigate crimes that can be entrenched and widespread.

Think drug running, money laundering and human trafficking but also mortgage fraud and public corruption.

“Most people have no idea we exist,” said Rocky W. Nelson, executive director since 2011. “I served on the first task force in the late ’80s-early ’90s as a detective with the Union County Sheriff’s Office. And I still didn’t realize how OOCIC was designed with local law enforcement in mind.”

The commission’s under-the-radar profile belies the contributions it has made to communities statewide.

“Without (the OOCIC task force), our drug epidemic would have been twice as bad as it was,” state Rep. Phil Plummer, a former Montgomery County sheriff, said in recounting problems with Mexican drug cartels. “We’d be in trouble, trust me.”

As a member of the commission, Portage County Prosecutor Victor Viglucci has seen the results firsthand.

“Some of the most successful task forces in this state’s history have come from OOCIC,” Viglucci said.

In 2018 alone, OOCIC task forces seized $4 million in currency and $57.5 million worth of drugs, said Deputy Director Matt Hilbert. The haul included 141 pounds of fentanyl, 411 pounds of meth, almost 2,000 pounds of cocaine, 1,321 pounds of cocaine, 265 pounds of heroin, 647 pounds of meth, 64,921 pounds of marijuana, and $33.3 million in U.S. currency. The street value of narcotics seizures was $262.6 million.

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Grants will help trafficking victims

As attorney general, Dave Yost is emphasizing the fight against human trafficking, and he is turning up the pressure.

In one effort, his office is offering grants of up to $10,000 to nonprofit and public agencies that deal with human trafficking to help survivors rebrand tattoos that once declared them as property.

“The journey of a survivor out of slavery and addiction and trauma is hard enough to help survivors rebrand tattoos that once declared them as property,” Yost said.

Once grants are awarded, local courts with specially dockets to address human trafficking determine a survivor’s eligibility. So far, such specialty dockets operate in Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton and Summit counties.

To apply for a grant, contact Aaron T. Bryant, victim services development director, at Aaron.Bryant@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov.

HELP FIGHT TRAFFICKING

AG Yost’s office creates customized posters (like this one for March Madness games in Columbus) to raise awareness of human trafficking. If an event in your area will attract a big out-of-town crowd and you’d like to join the fight, email Publications@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov.

Shooting victim finds new pursuit

Basketball standout was set to go pro before attack

A swad Thomas, who is booked to speak at the Two Days in May Conference on Victim Assistance, tells a story about two young men of color who come from the same poor neighborhood.

One is “Thomas himself.”

Of the men in his family, including cousins, five have been shot and seven have been incarcerated.

“They were my nontraditional role models — individuals who I did not want to follow in their footsteps,” Thomas, 36, said in an interview.

So he focused on school and basketball, becoming the first member of his family to go to college. He graduated with honors in 2009 from Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

A point guard on the basketball team, he also led the school to its first berth and first victory in the NCAA Division III tournament.

“Playing basketball wasn’t just a sport,” he said. “It was the only outlet for me to really escape from this community where I was surrounded by violence, poverty, drugs.”

The second man in Thomas’ story shot him twice in the back.

The attack occurred in 2009, three weeks before Thomas was set to travel to the Netherlands to sign with a pro basketball club.

The shooter grew up in the same Hartford, Connecticut, neighborhood that Thomas did. He also had once been shot — in the face at age 14. Four years later, he and another man shot Thomas in a botched robbery at a corner store.

The story illustrates what Thomas calls the cycle of violence.

“He walked around my community for years angry, depressed, stressed and didn’t get help,” Thomas said. “I honestly felt that, as a result of his unaddressed trauma, I became a victim of gun violence.”

“I think about what, if when he became a victim, he had gotten all the support he needed to heal? Maybe I would be oversleeping basketball to this day, making a lot of money and living out my dream.”

Instead, after leaving the hospital, Thomas relearned to walk and went on to earn a master’s degree in social work from the University of Connecticut. He’s married, lives in Atlanta and is managing director of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, through which he helps victims push for more support and a bigger role in the criminal justice system.

Too few victims and their families get the help they need, Thomas said. That can lead to housing instability, drug use, revictimization and even criminal acts.

But addressing trauma can help crime victims live better lives and prevent more crime, Thomas says. Unfortunately, many victims don’t even realize support services are available.

“I know that, as a college athlete, as someone who was known in the community, I got no support after I became a victim of gun violence, no help from victim services in the community.”

He said, “Law enforcement came to visit several times — not once did they ask if I needed any help. ‘They didn’t tell me there was a victim advocate or victim compensation.’”

That lack of support continued a pattern. In 1993, when Thomas was 10 and living in Highland Park, Michigan, his best friend, Reubin Elder, was killed — the random victim of a drive by shooting. Thomas and his friends, he said, returned to school the next Monday.

“There weren’t counselors at school,” he said.

“We didn’t host an assembly to tell the kids what happened. Our families didn’t talk about it.”

Just as troubling, Thomas said, is how little the situation has changed since then.

“My story is not unique. My story is very common to so many victims of crime, primarily in marginalized communities — communities of color.”

To stop the cycle of trauma and violence, he sees the need for more partnerships between police and community-based organizations.

“They’re the people who can reach out and make a difference, especially if they get more resources,” he said.

These days, Thomas considers himself lucky to be alive. He has new dreams — to create a national network of support groups for young male victims of gun violence and help stop the cycle of violence.

“I’m gonna get there,” he said.
How familial DNA led to ‘a serial killer’

Investigators spent years searching for a suspect after CODIS linked 3 cold-case killings through DNA left at crime scenes.

familial DNA test rarely used in Ohio led to the arrest of Samuel W. Legg III, a former truck driver suspected of killing at least three women decades ago — and maybe his stepfather.

“It’s a way to call him a serial killer,” Attorney General Dave Yost said in February while announcing Legg’s arrest.

The former northeastern Ohio resident, 50, who had, by his own admission, killed in Medina County from Arizona, is being held on $1 million bond in the 1997 rape of a 17-year-old. He also has been indicted in the 1992 killing of a woman in Mahoning County; other indictments are being prepared.

Diane Gehres, technical leader of the Combined DNA Index System at the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, said CODIS first linked two of the crime scenes — a homicide in 1996 in Wood County and one the next year in Illinois — in 2006, when the system found the same DNA logged from both.

The Mahoning County homicide was added to CODIS. For more information, contact CODIS@oioattorneygeneral.gov.

“About 250 a month go out,” Gehres said.

Every night, CODIS searches for matches, be they between crime scenes or between an offender and a crime scene. When the system finds a match, BCI sends a ‘hit letter’ to the appropriate law enforcement agency.

“If scientists get a match, they know they’ve linked 3 cold-case killings through DNA left at crime scenes.

The more DNA in CODIS, the more leads the system and familial DNA testing can provide. Please ensure your agency is collecting DNA from everyone it should be.

Familial DNA searches are used only on cases in which there is a public safety issue and all investigative leads have been exhausted. There is a formal request and approval process. For more information, contact CODIS@oioattorneygeneral.gov.

Braunschweiger came across a 29-year-old cold case in Elvira in which a 14-year-old child had been killed. Legg was the girl’s stepfather.

Salzer found the rape in Medina, a case in which Legg had been accused but never charged. When police questioned him in 1997, he claimed the sex was consensual.

The 17-year-old girl had gotten a rape kit completed, pieces of which the Medina police still had. DNA from those pieces — which Legg had confirmed would be his — matched the unknown cold-case killer in CODIS.

The discovery allowed Medina police to secure a warrant to swab Legg for DNA. Through continual testing, matched DNA was extricated — all within a month of the familial DNA test.

The speed “was so crazy after working on these cases all of these years,” Braunschweiger said.

And another upside to the BCI team’s work, she said, was the resubmitting of old profiles, from places like Florida and California, to CODIS.

“Quite a few of them came back with DNA profiles, from places like Florida and California,” Braunschweiger said. “Ten was enough … I think.”

Jeffrey Scott

New leader of OPOTA

As the new executive director of the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, Jeffrey Scott said he welcomes suggestions for improvement from the staff and others.

“The nice thing about being the new guy is having an open mind and looking for ideas,” Scott, who in April became OPOTA’s 11th executive director. “If you’ve had ideas sitting on the shelf, this is the opportunity to bring them up.”

Scott arrived at OPOTA from Notre Dame College in South Euclid, where he was police chief. He also is president of the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police and has written about firearms, tactical response, active threats and other topics.

He has worked for 30 years in public safety, including more than 23 in law enforcement, after beginning his career as a cadet in 1986.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, who named Scott to the position, praised Scott’s background as a notable asset.

“A cop and a teacher who’s going to teach cops, Chief Scott brings a wealth of educational and first-hand law enforcement experience to the academy,” Yost said.

Heinz von Eckartsberg

BCI’s new No. 2

The new assistant superintendent of the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation knows what local police need.

After all, Heinz von Eckartsberg arrived at BCI directly from an eight-year run as chief of police in Dublin, a community of 49,000 people in central Ohio.

“Law enforcement begins at the local level, and we are thrilled to add Chief von Eckartsberg to our team,” Attorney General Dave Yost said in announcing the appointment.

Von Eckartsberg joined the Dublin PD in 1983. Besides chief, he served as a patrol officer, a part-time instructor, operations commander and services-bureau commander.

During his time leading the department, personnel grew from 90 to 113 and crime declined every year. The department also started a citizens academy and moved to shared services dispatch operations, based in Dublin.

“After 36 years in local law enforcement, I very much look forward to interacting with and providing assistance to our partners throughout the state,” he said.

Von Eckartsberg and his wife have three grown children, and the couple are passionate about motorcycles and motorcycle travel.

He also is a vegan and has run 10 marathons.

“But I’m not running them anymore,” von Eckartsberg said. “Ten was enough … I think.”

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OPOTA honors brave officers who gave everything

On May 2, four Ohio officers who lost their lives in the line of duty in 2018 were honored at the 32nd annual Ohio Peace Officers’ Memorial Ceremony.

Their names were added to the memorial wall at the Ohio Peace Officers Training Academy in London, bringing the total number of fallen officers honored there to 799.

The public show of support for fallen officers and their sacrifices is similarly striking.

Sgt. Tony Rudd of the Westerville Police Division, for example, said he was impressed by how many law officers from other agencies as well as community members turned out for a weeklong show of support after two officers were ambushed in February 2018.

“Somehow managed to touch so many people’s lives and somehow managed to touch as many people’s lives and make a difference by being himself and being engaged,” Rudd said.

The married father of two enjoyed spending time with his family and friends.

OFFICER ANTHONY P. MORELLI
Westerville Division of Police

“Since 1988, any story that I have told — the best times that I’ve had as an adult — inevitably Tony Morelli is part of that story,” said retired Training Officer Dave King, part of a tightly-knit group of officers who started in Westerville about the same time 31 years ago.

Morelli, 54, had served as a patrol officer, crime prevention officer and school resource officer. He worked special duty at the Westerville Library and taught self-defense classes for women.

The married father of two enjoyed tailgating before Ohio State games, working out and having fun with his friends.

“Every day was something special to him,” Rudd said.

OFFICER VU XU. NGUYEN
Cleveland Division of Police

“All Vu wanted was for his family to be happy,” said Sgt. Jennifer Giacca, who went through the academy with Nguyen and lives next door to his family. “But he also somehow managed to touch as many people’s lives and make a difference by being himself and being engaged.”

Nguyen, 50, spent 20 years as a patrol officer patrolling the streets of Cleveland.

The married father of two girls, who had 14 siblings, loved to eat and plan vacations for his family and anyone else who’d let him. He was known for passing out popcicles and organizing games for big groups of kids.

A success story

One former OOCIC effort, the Southwest Ohio Violent Crime Task Force, was brought together to combat violent crime in the small Village of Lincoln Heights in Hamilton County, said Lt. Brian E. Stapleton of that county’s sheriff’s office.

“The village was known as a safe haven for criminals who would go unmolested by the local police department,” he said.

In addition to the Hamilton County Sheriff’s Office, agencies that participated in the task force were the Cincinnati, Woodstock and Lackawanna police departments, the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation and the FBI.

By its conclusion, the task force had closed over 30 murder cases, taken 50 guns off the street and arrested a Lincoln Heights police sergeant for theft in office. The village police department also ended up shutting down.

“The task force effected real change in the Village of Lincoln Heights,” Stapleton said. “This was far and away the most successful investigative unit that I have been a part of in my 23-year career.”

Continued from Page 1

77 victims of human trafficking were rescued.

The commission created by the Ohio General Assembly in 1986, serves as a facilitator for the local, state and federal law enforcement agencies and prosecutors who join in its task forces. It provides special investigative powers as well as equipment, funding and other assistance.

Local control

An OOCIC task force is usually led by the sheriff’s office or police department that proposes it to the commission, allowing those who know their geographic areas best, and their problems best, to make the decisions.

That local control has been lauded as key to the commission’s enduring success.

“If you run it locally, you have the local trust of citizens reporting to us,” Plummer said.

He said his office, as a smaller department, has participate in tasks that led to successful prosecutions of criminals “we would otherwise not have had the resources and opportunities to pursue nonpartisan.

The commission, supported by a staff of 10, operates on a budget that was 10 times smaller than what the state sent to the Lottery Commission to spend on advertising contracts last year.

“The resources and abilities that OOCIC is able to provide,” said Gallia County Sheriff Matt Champlin, whose office has been a part of task forces, “are one small example of how our citizens receive a return on their tax dollars.”

In western Ohio...

In December, a task force learned narcotics were being smuggled inside legitimate truckers.

Two years ago, 43 pounds of fentanyl, 26 pounds of cocaine and 12 kilograms of heroin were seized.

In central Ohio...

In June last year, a task force arrested eight people on felony drug charges and seized about 75 pounds of cocaine, 500 pounds of marijuana, two stolen firearms and more than $600,000 in U.S. currency, part of a major narcotics investigation.

In southern Ohio...

There’s no concrete way to measure the value of OOCIC’s intangibles, such as the trust and respect it has earned from local departments.

Nelson, the OOCIC’s executive director, said he often fields calls from law enforcement officials looking for an introduction to someone in another part of the state. And he humbly emphasized that OOCIC successes rely on the relationship local law enforcement agencies build with each other and state and federal agencies.

“We’re here to build those relationships,” he said.

The task force approved a task force’s creation, the help that the commission provides depends on the nature of the investigation.

The OOCIC can supply technical gear and any special training needed; it can cover confidential-informant payments and contraband purchases by undercover officers. Part of the deal, too, is workers’ compensation insurance and potentially travel, office space and phone bill payments.

Members of the commission’s staff offer legal advice, help with clerical work and investigations, and forensic audio and video analysis.

This support is instrumental on a daily basis for the effectiveness of the detectives,” said Chief George Keal of the Toledo Police Department, which has experience on OOCIC task forces.

Trusted partner

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“We’re here to build those relationships,” he said.

Indeed, Keal named nine local, state and federal agencies with which the Toledo PD has stronger ties thanks to task force participation.

“These lines of communication can only enhance the battle against the criminal element,” he said.

“Rocky Nelson and Matt Hilbert should be commended for their hard work,” he said.

Likewise, Columbus Deputy Chief Becker praised the commission staff and its leaders, calling them knowledgeable and gifted mediators.

“The ability of the OCIC task force model to exponentially increase the success of our agency cannot be credited enough,” he said.
Coming up

Give us your feedback
We’re looking for ways to improve the On the Job newsletter — to turn it into a “must-read” for you and your colleagues in law enforcement — and we’d like your help. What types of articles or information related to criminal justice in Ohio would you like to see that seem to be missing? Conversely, what do you find less interesting or less helpful? Please send your suggestions to Publications@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov.

Share your success stories
As part of our improvement effort, we’d like to showcase police success stories from throughout Ohio. To do that, we need you to share examples of law enforcement efforts — big or small — that represent model police work. Email those details to Publications@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov or call Jenny Applegate at 614-995-0328.

By the numbers
Some facts and figures* from the 2018 Annual Report on Capital Crimes, recently completed by the Ohio Attorney General’s Office:

333 Death sentences issued by juries in Ohio since 1981, including four in 2018
56 People who have been executed, including one in 2018 — Robert Van Hook
21 People who have received commutations
29 People who died before they could be executed
45.9 The average age of an executed inmate
17.2 The average time in years spent on death row
8 People who have been ruled ineligible for the death penalty based on intellectual disability
75 Death sentences that have been removed as a result of judicial actions
142 People who were on death row as of Dec. 31, including 29 with execution dates scheduled

* Time frame is 1981-2018.