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Times-Picayune

DA candidates push witness protection

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By Gwen Filosa

Orleans Parish keeps failing to protect witnesses of violent crimes, the four candidates for district attorney agreed today with all promising to create services and security measures.

"A witness was killed recently because he was in the very same neighborhood as where he witnessed the activity," said Leon Cannizzaro, a former prosecutor who resigned from the state appeals court bench to run for DA.

"There is no excuse for keeping a case on the docket for two years and allowing a witness to be killed," Cannizzaro said.

At a DA forum sponsored by the New Orleans Press Club today, Cannizzaro brought up last Thursday's killing of 19-year-old Darrick Jack, gunned down in the 2000 block of Franklin Avenue almost two years after he witnessed the shooting death of Milton Marcelin, 26.

Kevin O. Harrison awaits trial for Marcelin's murder.

Saturday's primary election is likely to force a runoff on Nov. 4, paring a field of four candidates down to two. The next DA will take over an office plagued by no-show witnesses in a city that has a high rate of incarceration to match the nation's highest murder rate.

Jason Williams, a career defense attorney in his first political campaign, said that the DA's office must move faster once police nab a suspect. "When the DA doesn't get a case for another 60 days, intimidation or extortion has already happened," he said.

Former federal and state prosecutor Linda Bizzarro, in her first bid for public office, noted the lack of any protective measures at the courthouse during trials.

"Right now, the victim's family sits on one bench and the defendants' family sits on the other," said the 22-year veteran prosecutor who is now retired. "That is unacceptable."

Also waging his first political campaign, Ralph Capitelli, a defense attorney who was former DA Harry Connick's First Assistant in 1973, said when someone commits witness intimidation or jury tampering, the DA "needs to make an example of that person."

Capitelli added, "Ask the judge for the maximum penalty, because that individual is trying to destroy the fabric of our society."

While Capitelli and Cannizzaro continue to trade blows and attack ads over who is better fit for the DA's job, it was Bizzarro and Williams who sparred openly Tuesday.

Williams said that his three opponents were all trained under longtime DA Harry Connick in the 1970s. "The legacy is we have more nickel-and-dime petty offenders in jail. . . There was a policy and protocol of hiding evidence during that administration and (Bizzarro) was in a leadership role. . ."

"That's a lie," interrupted Bizzarro, who at least twice declared that Williams has never been a prosecutor.

When asked if they would personally prosecute cases, Capitelli and Bizzarro said that management was the priority while Williams and Cannizzaro each said he would show up in court.

Bizzarro said she would love to watch her opponents prosecute at trial. "It would be the first time in 30 years (Capitelli and Cannizzaro) would have done it, and the first time for Jason Williams," she said. "So I'll be there for that."

Gwen Filosa can be reached at gfilosa@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3304.

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