

## D.A. Williams opens new unit to focus exclusively on innocence claims

D.A. Seth Williams announced today that he has opened a new unit focused entirely on investigating wrongful conviction claims.

The unit will get vetted, legitimate innocence claims referred to them by the Pennsylvania Innocence Project, currently based at Temple Law School.

“We did meet with Mr. Williams and with several members of his staff a few times to give our thoughts on how they could implement a conviction review unit. The D.A. was open to hearing our suggestions, which we very much appreciated,” said PA Innocence Project legal director Marissa Bluestine. “This is all part of an ongoing effort to ensure that we’re not locking up the wrong people.”

The new unit will be led by 27-year veteran prosecutor Mark Gilson.

“I think this is something that the D.A. has wanted to do since he was elected to the office,” Gilson said.

“From a prosecutor’s perspective, a person was convicted for a reason. But we’re open to the fact that mistakes can happen, and it’s certainly possible that someone innocent could end up in jail.”

Gilson cited as an example the infamous Lex Street Massacre case, which he prosecuted. Charges were dropped against the first four suspects after “reasonable doubts” arose, Gilson said.

“That wrong was righted,” said Gilson, who later successfully prosecuted the four actual killers.

“The Philadelphia D.A.’s office is not so much about convictions as about getting it right. It’s about a search for the truth,” he said.

Gilson expects to investigate issues like recanted testimony and newly discovered evidence as part of his duties with the new unit.

“This is the right thing to do,” D.A. Williams said in a statement. “But let’s be clear, this is not a get out of prison free card for convicted felons. While we are looking at these cases with an open mind, it does not mean that we will agree with all or any new claims of innocence and or evidence. Mr. Gilson will also be working to protect valid verdicts of guilt.”