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Forum discusses violence

Candidates want to assist victims

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Candidates for McLennan County judge, district attorney and district judge discussed ways they would help sexual assault and violent crime victims during a forum Tuesday.

Members of the Waco Interagency Committee on Sexual Assault, which sponsored the forum, asked candidates which policies and procedures they plan to ensure that the rights of victims are protected.

Candidates for the district attorney's office agreed they would prosecute offenders and indicated they did not approve short sentences, early paroles and the practice of furloughing violent criminals.

"I intend to prosecute vigorously those sexual assault cases," said district attorney candidate Paul Gartner.

Gartner pledged to seek the advice and assistance of such agencies as WICOSA and to push for more cooperation between all agencies as well as education for himself and members of his staff, if he is elected.

"I am very much for prosecuting (sexual assault cases) — to go out on a limb to prosecute," said candidate Bill Vannatta. "I won't find an excuse not to prosecute."

Vannatta said he supports long sentences for criminals guilty of rape or other sexual assaults.

"I am a former police officer," he said. "I've seen these cases right after they've happened. It's not a pretty sight. Because of what happened to them, the ladies are emotionally and psychologically damaged for life."

McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell, running for reelection, pointed to his record in office.

"We do have the reputation for being the county that will go out on a limb," he said, adding that his office contests every parole that comes across his desk.

Feazell said he has "taken the heat" for prosecuting such cases as school officials accused of fondling students.

Feazell said his office "handles

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close to 5,000 cases a year, with about half the staff other counties have," and has prosecuted more child abuse and child sexual abuse cases than other DA offices.

"It's easy to play Monday morning quarterback, but we're in there taking the lumps," he said.

County judge candidate Jack Aaron said he thinks victims coming into county offices for assistance are "nervous and don't know the procedure."

He said victims "need to be given, step-by-step" instructions on how to cooperate, fill out forms and get counseling.

Aaron said victims have the right to "protection, safety and to

be notified of what's going on." Although the attorney general's office has published a pamphlet for crime victims, it is not widely used in McLennan County, Aaron said. He said several law enforcement officers told him they haven't seen the pamphlet.

County judge candidate Bert Cargill told WICOSA members his experience as a businessman will help spread county funds to needed areas in the wake of budget cuts. He said programs to benefit the victims of violent crimes are in the "same class as mental illness — the public would rather not get involved, unless it happens to them."

Norman Hoppenstein, also running for county judge, said he

wholeheartedly agrees with recent legislation passed to protect victims' rights.

"There has been too much emphasis on the rights of the accused and not enough emphasis given to the rights of the victims," he said.

Raymond Martin, another county judge candidate, said his experience as chief felony prosecutor under former McLennan County District Attorney Martin Eichelberger included times when he had "been up all night, going to the emergency room, talking to sexual assault victims" and later handling their cases.

He said under current laws, every police agency is required to inform a victim of his or her rights and that a victim's impact state-

ment is supposed to be filed in every case. "I understand that currently the victim's impact statement is not filed in all cases," he said. "This is the duty of the victim assistance coordinator under the county DA's office."

County judge candidate Joe Meadows said that if elected, he would contact the district attorney's and sheriff's offices and "discuss with them the implementation of current law as set forth by the Texas Legislature."

He said he would encourage local chiefs of police and hospital to carry out various provisions of the law, including the posting of notices in emergency rooms. John Ben Sutter, the district attorney's administrative assistant

who is running for the county judgeship, said he is a charter member of the Rape Crisis Center's board of directors.

"I wrote the grant which brought our first crime victim's assistance program to McLennan County," Sutter said. He said he is writing a grant to fund a child abuse investigator in the DA's office.

Although the Rape Crisis Center now is funded by the city of Waco, Sutter said, it assists victims throughout the county. He said McLennan County should share the agency's funding.

170th State District Court judge candidate Joe N. Johnson, who is currently serving his 23rd year as a justice of the peace, said crime

victims need help, counseling and cooperation.

He said the district court should have a system of checks and balances with the district attorney's office.

One way this could be done Johnson said, is to require the DA to "file a document with the court telling the court exactly what had been told this person (the crime victim), what had been done in the regard to counseling, threats made against this person and what has been done about them."

He said the court needs to be "fully informed" of such information.

County Judge Stanley Rentz who also is running for 170th district court, was not present