

U.S. attorney's office loses 3 'go-to guys'

2 prosecutors to work as defense attorneys, while third is retiring

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By MATT STILES / The Dallas Morning News

Three of the region's most experienced and skilled federal prosecutors recently left government service, creating a void at the U.S. attorney's office in Dallas, officials said.

Two veteran prosecutors – Michael Uhl and Michael Snipes – are switching to potentially more lucrative jobs as white-collar defense attorneys. The third, Leonard Senerote, is retiring.

The three, who have decades of combined experience on complex cases, are the last winners of the Greater Dallas Crime Commission's award for federal prosecutor of the year.

"It's a great loss for the office, no question about it," said U.S. Attorney Richard Roper, who supervises prosecutions of federal crimes such as bank robbery, immigrant smuggling and fraud from Dallas to the Panhandle.

"All three of these lawyers were go-to guys."

The departures of Mr. Senerote and Mr. Snipes mirror those of nearly 100 other federal prosecutors across the country as part of a Justice Department early retirement offer.

Under the plan, senior prosecutors and some other employees got severance payments of up to \$25,000 if they left before Sept. 30. All three men made around \$130,000 annually, records show.

The move was part of a national restructuring effort to bring in employees with new talents, such as advanced computer skills, authorities said.

Mr. Snipes and Mr. Uhl, who are used to prosecuting accused criminals, now make the transition to the other side – as defense attorneys.

Mr. Snipes last year traveled to Lubbock to prosecute a Texas Tech University professor charged with smuggling plague samples into the country. He also recently won a conviction in the case of a Dallas police union leader who bought

personal items with the organization's credit card.

Mr. Snipes said he plans to work from the office of Jim Rolfe, a former U.S. attorney turned defense lawyer.

Mr. Uhl, perhaps best known for his prosecutions of former Dallas City Council member Al Lipscomb and Republic of Texas leader Richard McLaren, joins a newly expanded firm, Fitzpatrick Hagood Smith & Uhl.

Both men said their new roles would take adjustment. But they probably will be just as formidable on the other side, said Gary Udashen, a veteran defense lawyer who's faced both men in federal court.

"I have no doubt about that," he said. "They are both good, experienced trial lawyers."

Both men said that they respect the role that defense attorneys play – and that they look forward to the opportunities of working with corporations and business people looking for help in an era of increasing corporate regulation and compliance.

"Whether you're a defense lawyer or prosecutor ... your ultimate goal is preserving our system of justice," said Mr. Snipes, a U.S. Army Reserve officer who just returned from three months in Iraq, where he advised a general.

Mr. Uhl, a former deputy criminal chief in the U.S. attorney's office, agrees.

"I always thought that justice was best served when there was good lawyers on both sides of a case," he said. "I can definitely do a good job as a defense attorney."

Mr. Senerote, who couldn't be reached for comment, planned to retire, his colleagues said. A former U.S. Army Special Forces officer, Mr. Senerote is an expert in complex securities cases. He tried many of the Dallas office's high-profile investor fraud cases over the years.

All three men will be missed in a district already reeling from the unexpected deaths of criminal chief Shannon Ross and civil litigator Thelma Louise Quince Colbert, Mr. Roper said. Ms. Ross, who had been feeling ill, was found dead last month in her home. Ms. Colbert accidentally drowned in July.

Mr. Roper, who praised both women's service, said the recent retirements are part of working in any government agency.

"Hopefully, we'll have some young prosecutors who will step up," he said.

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SWITCHING GEARS

Leonard Senerote

Age: 58

Education: Bachelor's degree, Clemson University, 1968; law degree, University of South Carolina, 1976

Experience: Captain, U.S. Army Special Forces; antitrust trial attorney, U.S. Department of Justice; assistant U.S. attorney, Northern District of Texas

Expertise: Complex securities fraud

Why leaving: Retirement
Michael Snipes

Age: 50

Education: Bachelor's degree, West Point, 1976; law degree, University of Texas, 1984

Experience: U.S. Army officer; assistant U.S. attorney, Northern District of Texas; Judge Advocate General Corps, U.S. Army Reserves

Expertise: Public corruption, white-collar fraud

Why leaving: Early retirement

New job: Private practice
Michael Uhl

Age: 45

Education: Bachelor's degree, Western Illinois University, 1981; law degree, Southern Methodist University, 1985.

Experience: Dallas County assistant district attorney; assistant U.S. attorney, deputy criminal chief, Northern District of Texas

Expertise: White-collar fraud, corruption

Why leaving: New opportunities

New job: Fitzpatrick Hagood Smith & Uhl