



Ben David, CEO of the Community Justice Center, gives a tour of their facility in downtown Wilmington. KEN BLEVINS/STARNEWS

From jail cells to justice

How a former New Hanover DA’s mission to help victims continues

Molly Wilhelm Wilmington StarNews | USA TODAY NETWORK

In September, Ben David stepped down from his role as district attorney of New Hanover and Pender counties after 20 years of service. However, his departure from the District Attorney’s Office signifies anything but the end of his commitment to justice in Wilmington. • “I want to continue to give victims a voice, I want to continue to advocate for second chances, I want to continue to fight for the people in this region,” David previously said in a sit-down interview with the StarNews following the announcement of his leave from office in November 2023. Now, as the chief executive officer of downtown Wilmington’s Community Justice Center, it’s safe to say he’s turned that vision into a reality nearly one year later.

The launch of the center, announced in January while David was still district attorney, took place with the help of \$5 million in funding from the New Hanover County Endowment. Located on the fourth and fifth floors of the Harrelson Center, the nonprofit is dedicated to addressing domestic violence, sexual assault, and youth violence. “We want to be a one-stop shop for victims,” David said, walking the halls of the newly renovated space. “We wanted to be that place where you get the warm handoff, not to have direct services provided, but to have wonderful people who are already doing this work have visiting office space (and) the entire community being able to access it.”



Go online
To see photos of Ben David through the years, scan the QR code.

David has long-since shared his plan to “fight crime by building community” – a mission that the center is now poised to carry forward. “That’s the number one thing I want people to remember (who ask) ‘Why is the former district attorney now the CEO of this place?’ ” David said while seated in one of

the center’s interview rooms, designed to offer victims a safe space to navigate their needs and share their stories. “This is not much different than (what) we’ve always been doing. We’re going to get justice.”

‘A place of incarceration is now the center for transformation’

Between 1978-2004, the North Fourth Street building housed female inmates in the former law enforcement center and jail tower. After years of dedicated efforts by the Harrelson Center, jail bars have been replaced by welcoming windows, flooding the

Continued on next page

Four things to know about Wilmington’s new Community Justice Center

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A new nonprofit focused on domestic violence, sexual assault, and youth violence has recently opened its doors in downtown Wilmington. Led by a prominent former Wilmington official, the center is committed to connecting community members with essential support services and resources, facilitating healing and promoting restorative justice. With hopes of being a “one-stop shop for victims,” here are four important facts about the Community Justice Center, located at 20 N. Fourth Street, Wilmington.

- The former district attorney of New Hanover and Pender counties serves as the Chief Executive Officer**
Ben David, former district attorney of New Hanover and Pender counties for 20 years, now serves as Chief Executive Officer for the Community Justice Center. The former district attorney has vowed to remain in the role of CEO with the center for at least the next three years – aligning with the duration of a \$5 million grant awarded by the New Hanover County Endowment.
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Members of the media and others had the opportunity to tour the future Community Justice Center at the Harrelson Center on Jan. 4 in downtown Wilmington after District Attorney Ben David spoke. The CJC opened in August at the Harrelson Center in partnership with the District Attorney’s Office. KEN BLEVINS/STARNEWS

Continued from previous page

2. The Community Justice Center operates under the Starfish Model

As former district attorney, David described his outreach efforts in New Hanover and Pender counties using the Starfish Model, which focuses on a collaboration between government, business, schools, nonprofits, and faith organizations, all centered around health

The Community Justice Center operates under the same structure, placing women and children at the center of the “starfish,” David said. This model is fundamental to the center that the starfish symbol serves as its logo.

Materializing the five arms of outreach, professionals from a variety of organizations will host office space within the Community Justice Center. This includes officials from the Wilmington Police Department, Coastal Horizons, the New Hanover County Sheriff’s Office, Novant Health, the Department of Social Services, UNCW’s Master of Social Work Program, the Carousel Center, legal aid services, and more.

3. A renovated jail tower serves as its new home

The Community Justice Center now occupies space formerly operated as a jail tower for female inmates in downtown Wilmington.

Originally opened in 1978 as the New Hanover County Law Enforcement Center, the North Fourth Street building transformed into the Jo Ann Carter Harrelson Center in 2005.

The five-story building housed inmates for nearly 26 years until 2004, when inmates were transported to the current New Hanover County jail. Renovations on the main holding space within the former jail towers began in 2019, wrapping up in 2021.

4. At least 20 other nonprofits operate from within the same building

Housed within the existent Harrelson Center, the Community Justice Center is centralized among at least 20 non-profits and additional partners, including the following:

- **A Bike for Every Child:** Collects new and gently used bikes from the community, refurbishes them, and gives them to children in need.
- **Cape Fear Latinos:** Addresses disparities in resource access for the local Latino community.
- **Operation Pretty Things:** An on-call resource dedicated to serving victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.
- **Family Promise of the Lower Cape Fear:** Case management and transitional housing for victims of domestic violence and homeless families with children.
- **LINC - Leading Into New Communities:** Traditional living and case management services for men and women returning from prison.
- **Catholic Charities:** Provides emergency assistance, family support, disaster services, immigration assistance, and parish and community engagement
- **Coastal BUDS:** Raising awareness, supporting, educating, and connecting people with Down Syndrome and their families
- **Salvation Army:** Provides social services, disaster relief, and support for those in need, including food, shelter, and rehabilitation programs.
- **Soaring As Eagles:** Empowering families of Title 1 schools through education and resources.
- **Kairos Center:** Provides learning opportunities, empowering individuals to lead healthier more productive lives.
- **Feast Down East:** Provides resources, education, and distribution opportunities to farmers while addressing equitable food access.
- **Restored Souls Foundation:** Provides support and resources to families with vulnerable children.

“Our combination of available space, ideal location and community partners already on site, make the Harrelson Center a perfect location for this integrated center to support public health and safety,” Harrelson Center Executive Director Meade Van Pelt previously said about the Community Justice Center.

A full list of the Harrelson Center’s partners can be found on their webpage.



Ben David, former district attorney for New Hanover and Pender counties, is now the CEO of the Community Justice Center, a nonprofit helping victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and youth violence.

Continued from previous page

space with light.

“A place of incarceration is now the center for transformation,” David said. “There are people that we’re serving now that remember when this was a jail because they were in it, and now they’re getting help in the same place.”

The former jail basketball court, once encircled by barbed wire atop the perimeter walls, now features a few picnic tables set against a backdrop of two vibrant murals.

“My vision for what we’re going to do on the fifth floor one day is to create some outdoor garden,” David said, standing in the heart of the remodeled court. “I think this could be a place where reunified families that might be across the street say ... what does it look like to move forward together? ... Maybe this is better than an aisleway at the courthouse.”

Artistic changes are happening not just on the former basketball court, but throughout the entire building – with the physical transformation of the space symbolizing the intangible transformation of the building’s purpose.

“We’ve ... sent letters to all the art teachers in our community ... we’re going to have an art contest,” David said. “We want our kids to contribute to the artwork here and it’s going to be a revolving exhibit where ... some of the people who are really traumatized are going to get uplifted by the fact that there’s people just like them that are sharing their gift like that.”

The center is coordinating with the University of North Carolina’s Master of Social Work program to include therapeutic art throughout the center. A few permanent pieces from George Pocheptsov, Bruce Bowman, and Rachard McIntyre already line the hallways.

“I think it’s a beautiful thing,” David said, reflecting on the evolution of the space from a jail into a sanctuary for victims.

Bringing the Starfish Model to life

The placement of the Community Justice Center within the Harrelson Center strategically centralizes the facility among several essential resources.

The center is located across the street for the New Hanover County courthouse and inside the same facility is at least 20 other nonprofits. The fourth and fifth floors of the center will house law enforcement officials, healthcare professionals, social workers, legal aid, and more.

As district attorney, David used the Starfish Model to illustrate the structure of community. This same model is driving the structure of the Community Justice Center – so fundamental that the starfish symbol serves as its logo.

“What I said is let’s reimagine what the starfish can look like if we put women and children at the center and everything revolves around them and there’s five arms of outreach,” David said.

The building’s planned amenities are designed to meet the needs of the “guests” and “members” the center serves, including a space for virtual testimony, a room specifically tailored for the safety and comfort of children, a small medical facility for performing rape kits and other medical testing, enhanced internet security, and more.

“You have to have that relationship of trust ... you have to bring resources (to victims in the community),” David said. “Poverty doesn’t have a car. Crisis



Ben David explains the Starfish Model to describe the structure of the Community Justice Center. PHOTOS BY KEN BLEVINS/STARNEWS

“A place of incarceration is now the center for transformation. There are people that we’re serving now that remember when this was a jail because they were in it, and now they’re getting help in the same place.”

Ben David
Chief executive officer of downtown Wilmington’s Community Justice Center

says, ‘I’m backing out,’ but if you actually already have (victims) here, it’s like putting one baby step in front of the other and what you’ll see is, in a little while, they’re walking.”

‘Getting victims to find their own voice’

The platform David championed in the district attorney’s race two decades ago still resonates today.

“I ran 20 years ago on the idea that we’re going to give victims a voice. This is about getting victims to find their own voice ... and to empower people,” David said. “That’s really what this is, whether we’re talking about kids living in high poverty and high violence, or we’re talking about women and children living in a domestic violence situation.”

The center aims to revolutionize support for victims by delivering help on-site, rather than merely directing people to external resources scattered throughout the Port City. This approach streamlines processes that can often be

complex with hopes of increasing success rates while facilitating healing and promoting restorative justice.

“We’ve been doing a lot of this work on the fifth floor for years at the courthouse, but now to ... expand the footprint from 600 square feet to 12,000 square feet and expand the team from four employees to 30 employees and ... have wrap-around services, that’s what I wrote the grant for,” David said, expressing his gratitude to the New Hanover County Endowment.

David has vowed to uphold his position as CEO of the nonprofit for the next three years, passionately advocating for a cause he believes is long overdue and will continue to serve the greater good in the future.

“The reason I’m the CEO, and I promised to stay for the life of the grant, is I believe if we do it right ... this will outlive us all,” David said. “When I said we are going to be here for 100 years, I meant it. We have spent a lot of time and energy and resources to make this a first-class facility that has justice at the core of everything.”