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## Candidates for Lake County state's attorney discuss ideas

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The two men seeking the state's attorney seat in Lake County both said they want to restore faith in the local justice system following recent criticism of some high-profile convictions in Waukegan.

Democrat Christopher M. Kennedy will face Republican Michael G. Nerheim in November's general election to replace retiring Republican Michael J. Waller.

Waller served about two decades as top prosecutor but faced scrutiny for his office's handling of various rape and murder cases.

For example, a December Illinois appellate court ruling reversed the 2009 guilty verdict of Juan Rivera, convicted three separate times of the 1992 rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl in Waukegan.

DNA evidence eventually excluded Rivera as the rapist though he originally confessed to the crime.

"We need a state's attorney who's going to make tough decisions," said Steven P. McCollum, a criminal defense attorney in Waukegan. "I'm not saying Mike Waller hasn't done that, he's had a tough job over the years. But when you're faced with having a signed or video-taped confession and then DNA says they didn't do it, that's pretty tough."

Kennedy and Nerheim both intend to create an independent conviction review board that would review post-conviction cases. The panel would also suggest ways to improve prosecutions and provide recommen-

dations to the state's attorney.

The state's attorney's office in Lake County currently employs 73 assistant state's attorneys and interacts with about 48 law enforcement agencies, said Teri White, chief deputy of administrative services.

Here is a snapshot of each candidate's goals if elected.

### Christopher M. Kennedy

Kennedy, 44, graduated from The John Marshall Law School in 1994 and spent the first four years of his career as a prosecutor in the Lake County state's attorney's office.

Kennedy then moved into private practice, focusing on civil litigation. He now works as a solo practitioner at the Law Office of Christopher M. Kennedy P.C.

"I loved being a prosecutor and it was the most fulfilling work I've ever done because you serve the public," he said. "... It's too important to let the office continue on the same course."

Kennedy worked as an advocate with the Autism Society of Illinois from 2003 to 2009. Kennedy's 11-year-old daughter faces autism and epilepsy. He worked with legislators to change Illinois laws to provide better benefits for children with disabilities and their families.

"I have a track record of accomplishing serious reforms and taking on entrenched systems and interests and having a lot of success with it," Kennedy said.

He said he wants to not only identify wrongful convictions, but also find the real perpetrator of those crimes. In Rivera's case, for example, he said he hopes to petition the federal court to order the FBI to test the DNA



Christopher M. Kennedy

sample found at the crime scene in its database of sex offender profiles.

He intends to create a specialized unit within the state's attorney's office to investigate and prosecute sex crimes because of offenders' high recidivism rates and the sensitivity needed for victims.

Kennedy lives in Libertyville with his wife and three children.

### Michael G. Nerheim

After he graduated from John Marshall in 2000, 39-year-old Nerheim spent the first seven years of his career working as an assistant state's attorney in Lake County.

He moved into private practice in 2007, doing criminal defense.

"It's critical that the state's attorney realize being a prosecutor is about being fair and having handled cases on both sides, I really think that sets me apart," said Nerheim, a partner at Fox, Lunardi, Zeit & Nerheim in Waukegan.

Nerheim said he intends to create a Gang Prosecution Unit,



Michael G. Nerheim

in which a handful of prosecutors work exclusively on gang cases and help improve communication between law enforcement agencies.

"If you go to every police department in Lake County, there's a handful of officers that can give you a very clear picture of the gang problem in their respective town," Nerheim said. "The state's attorney's office can provide that centralized leadership so we're sharing information and not tackling it town by town, but on a county-wide level."

He said he also wants to start a diversion initiative for first-time nonviolent offenders called the Alternative Prosecution Program, which allows offenders to perform community service rather than face incarceration.

He said he also plans to hire a media relations employee because "that's how you talk to the people, and the people have a right to know what's going on in that office."

Nerheim lives with his wife and three children in Gurnee.