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Opinion

## Credit union hostage standoff shows need for culture change in State's Attorney's Office

**By J. Hanley**

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On Jan. 3, a tragedy occurred at the Heritage Credit Union in Rockford. The suspect, Nicholas August, has been accused of taking a credit union employee hostage and assaulting her. As the suspect's history has come to light, questions have surfaced: "How could this have happened?" and "Why wasn't this guy in jail?" Naturally, people are bewildered, scared and angry.

As it should, this incident has served as a catalyst for an evaluation of our criminal justice system and particularly the State's Attorney's Office. Much of this evaluation will focus on the handling of the suspect's prior criminal cases. But we must also continue the broader discussion of how we as a community view survivors and abusers.

This tragedy comes at a time when our community leaders are driving a complete culture shift in the way we address domestic violence cases. Put simply, we just don't take these cases seriously enough and aren't very good at holding abusers accountable and the "system" itself often re-victimizes survivors. This culture shift will require the collaboration and effort of law enforcement, judges, and elected officials. We are making progress as evidenced by the pending establishment of a Family Peace Center in Rockford. But for these efforts to truly be successful, the State's Attorney's Office must do better.

I have reviewed the public record relating to the suspect's criminal history, and while I admittedly don't know all the details surrounding these cases, a few things are clear. First, based upon his criminal history, probation was not an appropriate sentence. He needed to be incarcerated. His cases should have been prioritized and the maximum sentence sought. His case is representative of many others like it and it needs to be fixed now.

The State's Attorney's Office must get better at gaining survivors' trust and preparing them to testify. Cases must be prosecuted without delay as the longer a case drags out the less likely justice will be served. And while these and other changes should be implemented with haste, until the culture within the State's Attorney's Office changes, meaningful progress will be thwarted.

I also know this, the prosecutor who handled the suspect's most recent case in Winnebago County is a good one. Like nearly all his colleagues, he cares deeply about the people of Winnebago County and seeks justice each day.

But justice will remain elusive if he and his fellow prosecutors are not given the chance to succeed. Yes, they are underpaid and overworked. But more importantly: Are they trusted and inspired? Do they have a clear idea of their office's priorities? Are they given ownership of their cases? Have they been mentored? The answers to these questions appear to be "no." The current culture within the office is one of fear, isolation and mistrust. And we are less safe because of it.

When I worked as a state and federal prosecutor, each day I woke up inspired by the mission of a prosecutor — to seek justice. During that time, I was led by great prosecutors — leaders I would have run through a brick wall for. As state's attorney, I will inspire that same sentiment in those working in the State's Attorney's Office. And I will gain the trust of law enforcement, victims, judges, elected officials and, most importantly, the people of Winnebago County. It is time we expect more from our state's attorney.

*J. Hanley is a Republican candidate for Winnebago County state's attorney*