

# Missouri Lawyers

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## WEEKLY

### LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

#### Kansas City lawyer brings law enforcement background to oversight role

BY JESSICA SHUMAKER

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**K**ansas City attorney Nathan Garrett isn't the first lawyer to become president of the Kansas City Board of Police Commissioners, but his background as a former rank-and-file police officer and prosecutor equips him with a unique perspective on the job.

Garrett, of the firm Graves Garrett, has spent his career working in different levels of law enforcement, from the streets to the courtroom.

In July 2017, former Gov. Eric Greitens appointed Garrett to fill the remaining two years of a resigning commissioner's term on the board. The outgoing commissioner Garrett replaced also had been the board vice president, putting him in line to become president in his second year of service. He took the position of president in April.

In that role, Garrett is a public face for the board, which provides oversight to the Kansas City Police Department.

The board was created in response to corruption in the police department during the era of political boss Tom Pendergast, who controlled much of Kansas City politics and government during the 1920s-30s. The department has been under state control since 1939. The governor appoints the members of the board, typically to four-year terms.

Garrett said he's enjoyed the work so far.

"This is something we all do because we feel a calling to do it," he said. "There's a public responsibility associated with it. It's not an income-producing exercise."

Garrett's first passion was law enforcement. While he was completing his undergraduate education, he worked as a deputy juvenile officer and a commissioned sheriff's deputy during the summers in his hometown of West Plains.

He worked for the police department in West Plains for a year after he completed college before enrolling in law school at the University of Tulsa College of Law. He continued to work for the police department when he returned for the summers.

After graduating from law school, Garrett took a job at the Howell County Prosecuting Attorney's Office as an assistant prosecutor. While the job represented a good opportunity to work in the legal field in his hometown, he said he missed working in law enforcement.

"I enjoyed it. I benefited greatly from the experience, but I wasn't done with being on the streets," he said.

He would go on to become a trooper



**"I have an eternal itch to have my nose in the business of law enforcement," says attorney Nathan Garrett, president of the Kansas City Board of Police Commissioners. Submitted photo**

for the Missouri State Highway Patrol — and the first lawyer to graduate from the academy — and later joined the FBI as a special agent. While stationed in Dallas, Texas, he became a special assistant prosecutor for the U.S. Attorney's Office, handling national security prosecutions.

In 2005, he transferred to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Missouri, where he became chief of the national security unit in Kansas City. He remained there until 2008, when he joined former U.S. Attorney Todd Graves, who now is chairman of the Missouri Republican Party, at the firm now known as Graves Garrett.

For the past 10 years, he's represented clients facing federal investigations and commercial litigation.

Garrett said one aspect of his legal work

that has helped him on the board of police commissioners is the ability to identify and find solutions to problems. While some of that was instilled by his family while he was growing up, he said he built on that skill set in the courtroom and with clients.

"I know how investigators and prosecutors approach problems, but I have my own style, then and now, of identifying the real problem and... given the realities of that circumstance, [finding] a solution to it," he said. "That's frankly what I feel I do best."

Additionally, he said working in law enforcement has honed his investigation skills, which in turn helped his private practice.

He said his perspective as a law enforcement official also has helped him as a lawyer in building credibility with federal prosecutors, which enables him

to effectively advocate for his clients.

"The government knew I had a good understanding of the realities of the situation," he said. "The situation was what it was, not what others wanted it to be. I had my feet on the ground."

As a federal prosecutor, he noted that sometimes an attorney's advocacy for a client can be "subjectively zealous."

"They don't do a client a service when they're just espousing something because that's the argument they think is in the client's best interest, even though it might have no real weight or support demonstratively," he said. "I think that's something on this side you have to manage all the time. What do the facts actually show? And given that reality, that's all we can ultimately deal with."

No matter where his legal career takes him, Garrett said it's hard to stay away from the roots of his career.

"I have an eternal itch to have my nose in the business of law enforcement," he said.

For the remainder of his term, Garrett said he expects the board will continue to work through such key issues as the use of body cameras, resource management and violent crime.

In terms of resource management, he said he hopes to ensure that the department makes the best use of its budget and its people. If the department needs more of either, he said he wants to make sure there's a solid argument for why more is needed, and to show that resources are managed well.

Already, the city has allocated enough funds to the department to hire approximately 35 officers in the next year.

"There's a curve to that. You don't get them all tomorrow. We're looking forward to getting those allocated," he said. "Certainly, having more officers to dispatch is helpful. We just want to make sure we're using what we have wisely."

Garrett said the board is doing everything it can to address rising violent crime in the city. He said it's a thorny issue because violence can be cyclical, and some of its causes can extend beyond the ability of police to curb it.

He said his job as a police commissioner is to "figure out those tools that make a difference tonight."

"I care about those more philosophical/conceptual, longer-term, broader issues... but I have to figure out what helps me tonight," he said. "What's going to help prevent one more homicide? What's going to ensure that my officer comes home safely tonight?"