

GANG UNIT DEPLOYED

Enforcement team ready to take on MS-13

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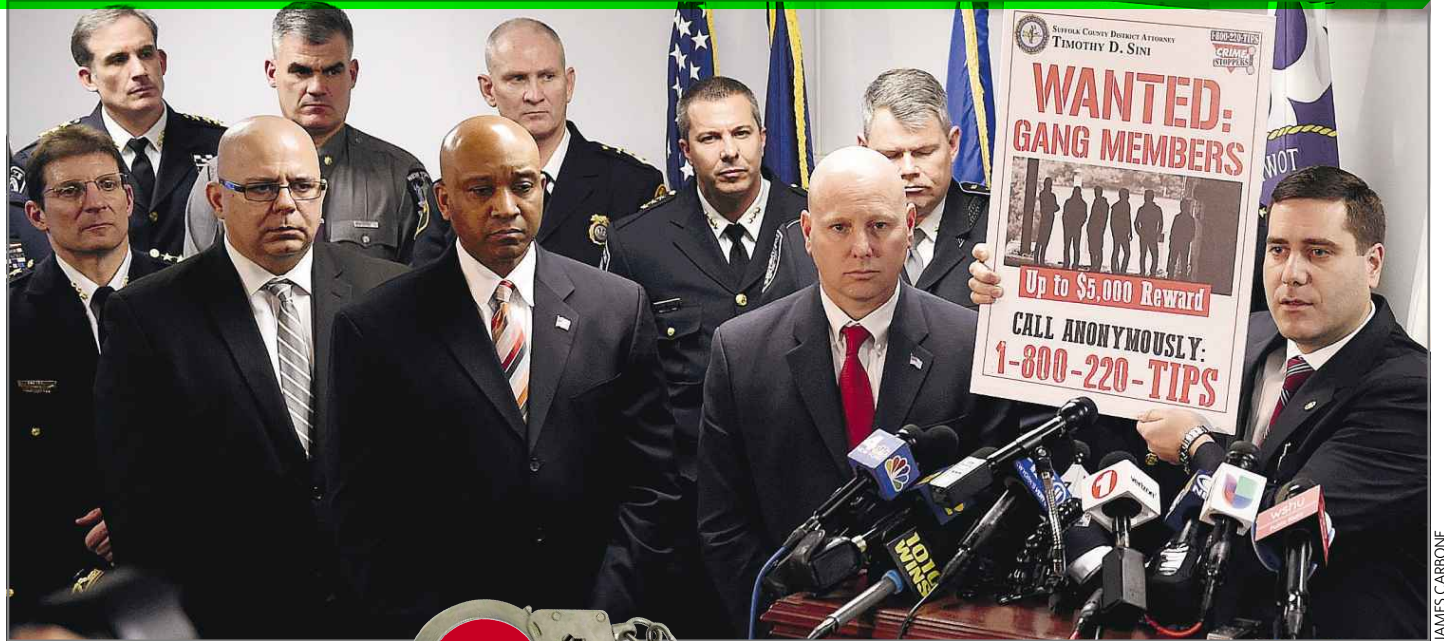
A team of prosecutors and investigators is now dedicated to going after the notorious street gang MS-13, which has killed more than two dozen people on Long Island in the last two years, Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini announced Wednesday.

The new Gang Unit will focus on all crimes committed by gang members, including low-level offenses, and work with federal prosecutors to determine the most effective venue for prosecutions, Sini said. This will create “a centralized depot for gang crimes that was lacking under the previous regime,” he said.

“It allows us to make sure that no one’s slipping through the cracks,” Sini said. “So if there’s a gang member charged with a non-gang offense, we’re going to want to take a tougher position on that case. We might want . . . to leverage the case to get information out of the person . . . to get the best bang for our buck to make sure the person goes to jail for as long as possible.”

Sini, who was surrounded by officials from the FBI, other federal officials and Suffolk County law enforcement agencies, also announced a new initiative with Suffolk County CrimeStoppers to offer cash payments of up to \$5,000 for information leading to the arrest of gang members. This includes MS-13, estimated to number some 2,000 members on Long Island, according to federal officials.

The 14-member Gang Unit, an arm of the new Enhanced Prosecution Bureau, is part of a sweeping transformation of the district attorney’s office that Sini assumed last month. He vowed to restore ethics to the office that he said was tainted by former District Attorney Thomas Spota.



JAMES CARBONE

SUFFOLK GANG UNIT

- THE TEAM** New 14-member group of prosecutors and investigators that will be “a centralized depot for gang crimes.”
- FOCUS** Crimes committed by street gangs, including low-level offenses; will work with feds to determine venues for prosecutions.
- NEW INITIATIVE** Suffolk CrimeStoppers to offer cash payments of up to \$5,000 for information leading to arrest of gang members.

He retired last year following a federal indictment on charges he and a former top aide covered up crimes committed by former Suffolk Police Commissioner James Burke. Spota has pleaded not guilty.

Sini said he had heard from scores of people about Suffolk’s lack of a gang prosecution team — which the Nassau district attorney’s office has — before he took office. Leslie Anderson, the acting deputy bureau chief in the executive office who worked on gang prosecutions in Suffolk under former District Attorney James Catterson Jr., also personally urged Sini to set up a unit and wrote a memo detailing the need, Sini said.

Christiana McSloy, a veteran prosecutor who previ-

ously worked on gang cases in the Nassau district attorney’s office and before that in the Bronx, was named bureau chief of the Enhanced Prosecution Bureau.

Kate Wagner was named the deputy bureau chief in charge of the Gang Unit, which will consist of eight assistant district attorneys and six detective investigators. One of the prosecutors speaks Spanish.

Sini said the team would be taught best practices for prosecutions in an effort to make them “highly trained gang specialists.” At least one prosecutor will be on-call at all times to assist with gang arrests.

“Whenever there is a gang-related crime or a gang members arrested by any law enforcement agency within Suffolk County, they will be able to call that gang expert for advice and guidance and support,” Sini said. “This is

District Attorney Timothy Sini announces creation of Gang Unit to media Wednesday in Hauppauge. ■ Video: newsday.com/suffolk

stark contrast to how things were being done prior to my administration.”

Sini, Suffolk’s former police commissioner, made several digs at former District Attorney Spota without mentioning his name.

“In the past, oftentimes personal relationships, egos and turf battles got in the way of effective law enforcement,” Sini said. “Those days are over.”

Sini said in the past cases against gang members were assigned to different bureaus based on whether the charges were felonies or misdemeanors and a single case might be handled by multiple prosecutors.

Sini said having an in-house entity in the district attorney’s office concentrated solely on gangs will lend itself to more ef-

fective collaboration with other law enforcement, especially federal prosecutors.

“In some instances, it may make sense to start a case in the state system, because we’re able to develop probable cause in an efficient manner, while it may take longer to build that federal case; but if that federal case is made working together, we will gladly hand that case over to the Eastern District for prosecution,” he said.

Previously, Sini said, “There was a practice where the DA’s office would not invest any resources in a case because they knew it would ultimately go federal, which was bad practice.”

In a statement, Richard P. Donoghue, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, said: “We are committed to working closely with the Suffolk County District Attorney’s Office and all our state and local partners to combat gangs and the threats they pose to our communities.”

The brutal killing of two teens in 2016 focused a national spotlight on Suffolk’s MS-13 violence. Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens, of Brentwood High School, were bludgeoned to death with bats and hacked with machetes by MS-13 gang members, authorities have said.

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— Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini

GANG TERROR ON LONG ISLAND