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With no political aspirations, U.S. attorney focuses on cases that affect NJ communities

[Keldy Ortiz, NorthJersey.com](#) Published 5:30 a.m. ET Dec. 3, 2019 | Updated 5:47 p.m. ET Dec. 8, 2019

He has signed off on convictions of New Jersey police officers, gang members and a mayor.

He even worked the courtroom himself, taking on a heroin trafficking case.

It's unlikely the public knows the name of this lawyer who defended a case in the George Washington Bridge lane closure scandal, even though he has held one of the top law enforcement positions in the country for nearly two years.

Craig Carpenito became the U.S. attorney of New Jersey in January 2018. But unlike those who had the position and used it as a springboard to become a Supreme Court justice or governor, Carpenito says he has no political aspirations.

In an interview with NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey, Carpenito — who once worked in the office as an assistant U.S. attorney — spoke about running the office that helped build the careers of Chris Christie, Paul Fishman, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito and others.

Nearly two years into Carpenito's holding the position, the office has increased prosecutions in the state while creating violent-crime initiatives in several cities.

"I wanted to try and run this office like I was just another line assistant in the office and focus on the cases, focus on the work, focus on moving the ball forward every day and being here and being physically present every day," Carpenito said. "I think we should speak through our actions in the cases that we bring. And it's no criticism of my predecessors. I mean they had their style."

During Christie's years as U.S. attorney, his office racked up 130 convictions, including those of former Passaic Mayor Samuel Rivera and former Newark Mayor Sharpe James.

Fishman, who was in the office for eight years [before he resigned at President Donald Trump's request \(/story/news/politics/2017/03/10/attorney-general-seeks-resignations-46-us-attorneys/99026866/\)](#), won the convictions of two aides who worked close to Christie in the [George Washington Bridge lane-closing scandal \(/story/news/2018/12/19/bridgegate-prison-sentences-delayed-former-christie-aides/2365776002/\)](#).



U.S. Attorney, Craig Carpenito, is shown as he talks exclusively to The Record November 2019. Carpenito, who has held the office since January 2018, does not seek out attention as much as his predecessors. (Photo: Kevin R. Wexler/NorthJersey.com)

“I think that Craig is articulate and smart, and I think does very well when he’s in the media, but a lot of cases he’s brought have not been of as high a profile in terms of the target of the cases than the ones I had,” Christie said. “And that could change as time goes forward.”

Prosecutors who have worked with Carpenito said his approach is not built on thinking about what others have done but doing the work to the best of his ability.

“He’s not as flashy. He lets the results speak for themselves,” said Ricardo Solano Jr., a former federal prosecutor who is now a partner at a law firm in Newark, focusing on white-collar crimes. “That’s his style: not gregarious, but being extremely confident in his abilities.”

Michael Martinez worked with Carpenito during his first time in the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Martinez said Carpenito is always focused on the job at hand.

“He’s a straightforward person that knows the facts and knows what you can and cannot argue,” Martinez said. “He won’t stretch something. He wouldn’t let something like politics influence his decision on whether or not to bring a case.”

A new direction

When Carpenito, 46, came into the office after a decade in private practice, he wanted to make sure everyone had a say in how the office would take shape. The New Jersey native didn’t want to make a change just because he was the person in charge. He wanted to build relationships, not fracture them.

“I think what I had heard from our law enforcement partners, from our county partners, was that this office stopped focusing on some of the quality-of-life cases that really could impact the communities most immediately,” Carpenito said. “Without the threat of federal prosecution or the interest of the federal government, they felt that it was harder to bring enterprise-level cases.”



U.S. Attorney, Craig Carpenito, is shown as he talks exclusively to *The Record* November 2019. Carpenito, who has held the office since January 2018, does not seek out attention as much as his predecessors. (Photo: Kevin R. Wexler/NorthJersey.com)

With that in mind, Carpenito created a Violent Crime Initiative, which focused on quality-of-life issues in cities in the Garden State while also working with local police agencies. The initiative helped bring down shooting incidents in Jersey City by 69 percent in 2018 and parts of 2019. Newark crime dropped 15 percent from 2017 to 2018.

All this was done while keeping intact the office given to him by William Fitzpatrick, the interim U.S. attorney after Fishman stepped down.

"He could have made changes," said Shirley Emehelu, a prosecutor who left the U.S. Attorney's Office in June as the chief of asset recovery and money laundering unit. Emehelu had her title before Carpenito took the job and chose to keep her in her role. "What Craig made clear throughout the process and his overall approaches is that he had faith in supervisors."

Carpenito himself even tried a case. [Yasmil Minaya of Passaic County was on trial for his role in a heroin trafficking ring \(/story/news/crime/2019/05/07/passaic-county-nj-man-found-guilty-heroin-trafficking-charges/1134552001/\)](#). The case for Carpenito was important, as one of the goals was to tackle drug trafficking organizations.

"I wanted to make sure it wasn't some case where it looked like I was only doing it because it was going to get me press," Carpenito said. "To me, it was important to stand up in front of the entire office, try a case and know that half of them were going to come out thinking I did a great job and half of them were going to say: I could have done a better job than that guy did.

"But at least I stood in front of all of them and I did it," he said.

Carpenito's office has also prosecuted health care officials involved in alleged fraud in New Jersey, where opioid addiction continues to run rampant. So far, some doctors in the state face [illegal kickback \(/story/news/crime/2019/07/16/bergen-county-nj-doctor-pharmacy-staff-charged-kickback-scheme/1748630001/\)](#) charges. Recently, a [former business owner from Paramus admitted \(/story/news/crime/2019/11/25/paramus-nj-man-pleads-guilty-cheating-medical-insurance-companies/4303201002/\)](#) cheating medical insurance companies while bribing a psychiatrist.

Lawyers across the aisle took notice of how Carpenito has handled prosecutions that sometimes never see a jury.

"I think so far the word is he's quietly and efficiently either taken a case to trial or resolved in a real expeditious fashion," said John Azzarello, president of the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers in New Jersey and a former prosecutor. "It's not the department of convictions. It's the Department of Justice. As a prosecutor, it's not about winning or losing, it's about doing the job to the best of your ability and letting the jury decide."

The U.S. Attorney's Office has gotten convictions against now-former [Atlantic City Mayor Frank Gilliam Jr., who pleaded guilty in October to stealing \\$87,000 from a youth basketball team \(/story/news/new-jersey/2019/10/03/atlantic-city-nj-mayor-frank-gilliam-jr-pleads-guilty-resigns/3859541002/\)](#). Also, seven Paterson police officers have pleaded [guilty to traffic stop shakedowns \(/story/news/passaic/paterson/2019/03/26/paterson-nj-cops-arrested-fbi/3276810002/\)](#). Carpenito declined to comment further on the Paterson case because it remains pending.

From the start

After working in the Securities and Exchange Commission's Division of Enforcement from 2000 to 2005, Carpenito came to the U.S. Attorney's Office as a special assistant for one year before U.S. Attorney Christie hired him full-time.

A Seton Hall Law School alumnus, Carpenito worked on securities fraud, drug and gun cases before he was assigned to help prosecute Walter Forbes, chairman of Cendant Corp. at the time, who was accused of fraud. Carpenito worked on the case, but a jury could not convict Forbes during the first trial in 2004.



U.S. Attorney, Craig Carpenito, is shown as he talks exclusively to The Record November 2019. Carpenito, who has held the office since January 2018, does not seek out attention as much as his predecessors. (Photo: Kevin R. Wexler/NorthJersey.com)

“Craig came up to me and said, ‘Boss, you know, if we’re going to try this case a second time, I want to do it,’ ” said Christie, who was the U.S. attorney from 2002 to 2008. “First off, I love people who are ambitious and who will ask for it. That tells me they got the right motivation to want to do it.”

Carpenito partnered with Martinez on the case. Carpenito was enthusiastic about trying the case but said his fiancée wasn’t thrilled because it was moved to Connecticut at the request of the defense after being postponed several times.

Growing number: [Why more Latinos in the U.S. are leaving the Catholic Church for Islam \(/story/news/2019/12/02/growing-number-latinos-nj-converting-islam/2567295001/\)](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2019/12/02/growing-number-latinos-nj-converting-islam/2567295001/).

New NJ law: [New accuser names former Cardinal McCarrick as dozens of lawsuits are filed under NJ law \(/story/news/new-jersey/2019/12/01/former-cardinal-mccarrick-named-new-accuser-first-wave-suits/4319290002/\)](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2019/12/01/former-cardinal-mccarrick-named-new-accuser-first-wave-suits/4319290002/).

During the deliberations of the second trial, in February 2006, Carpenito faced a conflict: The couple had planned a destination wedding in the Bahamas.

“We moved the date once, and my wife was not going to move the date a second time, so the judge gave me a Friday off,” Carpenito said. “I flew to the Bahamas. Got married. Flew back on Monday for court.”

Carpenito and Martinez ended up trying the case a third time because the jury could not agree on a verdict for the second time, and they got a [conviction against Forbes in October 2006 \(https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/business/01cendant.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/business/01cendant.html).

Two years later, Carpenito left the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

“I left for financial reasons,” he said, adding that his wife wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. “The numbers just didn’t work. I had student loans. I had a mortgage. I wasn’t going to last very long on one income, so I started looking to go into private practice and make more money so I could take care of the family.”

Though Carpenito left the office, it was not his last time helping in the public sector.

Christie, then governor, obtained the services of Carpenito, who was working in private practice. The governor was fending off a [civilian complaint filed against him in the George Washington Bridge lane closure scandal \(/story/news/new-jersey/2017/03/02/christie-not-charged-gwb-case-prosecutor-says/98656368/\)](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2017/03/02/christie-not-charged-gwb-case-prosecutor-says/98656368/). Christie was never charged.

"It's a huge honor to be asked to do the work. I was very proud, and quite frankly I really believed in the governor and still do," Carpenito said. "I believe he was completely innocent in that case, and I was proud to represent him."

Christie said he wanted someone who would be honest with him.

"At that point, I was the governor; people don't necessarily want to tell you the truth if they think you're not going to want to hear it on any particular day," Christie said. "And I knew Craig was the kind of guy who was loyal enough that he would feel it was his duty to tell me everything I needed to know, and that's the kind of guy I wanted."

In the office again

Soon after Fishman resigned in March 2017, several candidates emerged to take the job of U.S. attorney. Carpenito was one of them, but so was Geoffrey Berman.

"It seemed like it was Berman's job for sure," said Solano, the former federal prosecutor.

But Berman, who previously worked in the Southern District of New York, got the top job there, leaving Carpenito to fill the open position in New Jersey.

"There's usually a certain profile to a U.S. attorney. Many of them, especially those with political aspirations, tend to call attention to themselves, but Craig wasn't like that," said David Lat, a former federal prosecutor and founder of Above the Law, a legal website. "He wasn't that kind of political operator."

Carpenito went right to work, as the U.S. Attorney's Office prosecuted cases including rooting out public corruption and extortion.

Among the notable cases conducted by the office:

Frank Nucera, [a former Bordertown police chief was found guilty of lying to the FBI, but not guilty of a hate crime \(story/news/2019/10/09/bordertown-police-chief-frank-nucera-hate-crime-trial-guilty-lying-fbi/3850403002/\)](#). Carpenito said the case would be retried as a hate crime.

Two Iranian men indicted for allegedly hacking computers of hospitals and public institutions in several U.S. cities. Both remain at large.

Future plans

Carpenito is intent on making sure his office prosecutes cases that are important and affect the community at large.

In New Jersey, whether it's national security or violent crime, Carpenito said, the Garden State is reflective of all the priorities of the Department of Justice under any administration.

Carpenito is not thinking about what's next after his time as U.S. attorney is up.

"I don't know that when I walk out the door here, my time in the public sector has ended," Carpenito said. "But I am a lawyer. I love practicing law."

Keldy Ortiz is a breaking news reporter for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to all the major news happening in North Jersey, [subscribe here](https://offers.northjersey.com/specialoffer) (https://offers.northjersey.com/specialoffer). To get breaking news directly to your inbox, [sign up for our newsletter](https://profile.northjersey.com/newsletters/manage/) (https://profile.northjersey.com/newsletters/manage/).

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