

# Budget cuts mean more days off in Public Defender's Office

By [Chris Tisch](#), Times Staff Writer

In Print: Friday, January 23, 2009

Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger says state budget cuts have gotten so bad that he will begin closing his office on some days.

In an e-mail to employees Thursday, Dillinger said he can no longer absorb required budget cuts to his staff. Earlier this year Dillinger had to cut 19 positions from a staff of 210. Additional cuts would have forced him to let go of another 12 employees.

Instead, he will close his office five days this year. The first will be on a Monday, Feb. 16. The other four will be on Fridays.

"If we have to suffer this way, we might as well make it a three-day weekend," Dillinger wrote.

Reached Thursday evening, Dillinger said his budget has been cut by more than \$1.8-million, or more than 12 percent since 2007. While he agreed that all agencies are suffering through budget cuts, he said public defenders always have been underfunded. The additional cuts are too much to bear, he said.

"This really wasn't my choice. The Legislature made this choice," Dillinger said. "We have cut to the bone, and we just can't cut anymore."

Pinellas-Pasco Chief Judge Robert Morris said he understood Dillinger's financial predicament.

"We will work with him any way we can to get through this crisis," Morris said.

Courts spokesman Ron Stuart said it was too early to tell how the furloughs would affect defendants or the court system.

Dillinger's office represents thousands each year who cannot afford to hire lawyers.

After budget cuts in the summer, Dillinger threatened to shutter a misdemeanor court division for a month, leaving about 400 defendants without a lawyer.

The shutdown was avoided after county judges agreed to take steps to lessen the workload of assistant public defenders, who at the time were carrying case loads five times the recommended level.

Dillinger said Thursday that he believes his employees support his decision, even though they will lose pay.

"I cannot make people work for free, and I won't," he said. "The overwhelming response was people would rather take a day off than have their fellow employees lose their jobs."

[Last modified: Jan 22, 2009 11:07 PM]