

Public defender will stop working homeless cases in St. Petersburg

By ABHI RAGHUNATHAN Published January 31, 2007
St. Petersburg Times

Bob Dillinger, the Pinellas-Pasco public defender, has refused to extend a contract with St. Petersburg to protest what he called excessive arrests of homeless people in the city.

Last week, Dillinger notified the city that his office would no longer represent indigent people arrested for violating municipal ordinances, which are city codes that prohibit actions such as sleeping in the park after dark.

According to Dillinger's office, 676 of the 879 people booked into the Pinellas County Jail on municipal ordinance cases last year came from St. Petersburg, and the vast majority were homeless.

"They're trying to get the homeless out of the downtown area," Dillinger said. "I would rather have them spend money on helping the homeless rather than arresting them."

His office was providing representation for such cases on contract, charging the city a flat fee of \$50 a month. Private attorneys retained by the city for indigent defense likely would charge more. If the city doesn't provide legal representation, Dillinger said, it could face a class-action lawsuit.

Police Chief Chuck Harmon said his department had an obligation to arrest anyone who violated the law.

City Attorney John Wolfe hoped Dillinger would change his mind: "We're hoping to convince him to reconsider."