

DADE CITY - Bob Focht was first hired as a criminal defense attorney in 1973.

Just out of law school and only 29 years old, he never even had seen a trial.

There wasn't much on-the-job help once he started. He worked as the lone assistant **public defender** in New Port Richey; the others worked in Dade City, 40 miles away.

So much for mentoring. 'Our office was me, a secretary and an investigator,' the 61-year-old lawyer said. 'I basically had to figure it out myself.' Beginning in August, Focht will be saving inexperienced lawyers with the Pasco **Public Defender's** Office from having to do the same.

He'll be giving up most of his caseload to train the county's six assistant **public defenders** assigned to misdemeanor cases. Less-experienced lawyers normally handle misdemeanor cases before advancing to felony cases.

Bob Dillinger, chief **public defender** for Pasco and Pinellas counties, said increased funding from the state allowed him to create a training position in Pasco for the first time in about eight years. He already has two lawyers in the Pinellas County office working as trainers.

The increasing complexity in the law makes a training position more necessary; Focht's experience in the courtroom made him a natural choice, Dillinger said. 'We have the same philosophy in trial in terms of knowing when to be aggressive, when not to be, how to properly prepare and how to handle clients,' he said. 'That's something that takes experience, and Bob's got it.' Dillinger said Focht will watch the trials of misdemeanor lawyers and hold twice-a-week mentoring sessions with them.

Taking the position means Focht will give up his job representing clients out of the **public defender's** Dade City office - something he's done since 1997. In his new role, he will split time between Dade City and New Port Richey.

Focht said his health played a role in the decision to take on his new assignment.

He survived a bout with colon cancer in 1998, a heart attack in 2000 and double-bypass surgery four years ago. A diabetic episode kept him out of work briefly last month. 'My father had a stroke at 52 and was an invalid until he died at 56,' Focht said. 'I don't need that.' In his nine years around the Dade City courthouse, Focht has earned a reputation for being gruff with clients but also passionate in defending them.

It's not unusual for Focht to tersely tell clients, 'Don't talk,' when they try and speak up during pretrial legal confabs.

In his private discussions with defendants charged with serious crimes, Focht doesn't mince words. 'The state wants you dead,' he often tells clients facing the death penalty. 'Some people interpret that as him not caring,' said Tom Hanlon, who oversees the Dade City **public defender's** office. 'But that's not true at all. 'When you're doing everything you can for someone by busting your butt, you shouldn't have to hold hands and play patty-cake with them.' Hanlon, who has known Focht for more than 20 years, said Focht has a knack for 'fighting over everything there is to fight over,' even outside the courtroom.

A few years ago, the two drove together to a seminar for defense lawyers in Haines City. The next day, Hanlon drove by himself. 'I had a headache,' Hanlon said. 'He just loves to fight. Whatever topic you get onto, he just explodes. That's just his style.'