

Public defender claims success

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BOB DILLINGER

FLORIDA JUDICIAL CIRCUIT COURT DISTRICT 6

Bob Dillinger draws praise during his first year as public defender for, among other things, keeping his office on an even keel.

One year ago, St. Petersburg attorney Bob Dillinger took over as Pinellas-Pasco public defender after a bitter campaign to unseat the only man to hold the office since its inception in 1961.

Dillinger promised to shake things up. He vowed to get rid of people he described as incumbent Robert E. Jagger's overpaid friends, and said he could hire a dozen more lawyers with the money Jagger was using to pay his existing staff of 72 assistant public defenders.

But after taking office, there were no mass firings. Some of Jagger's closest associates left, and others had their salaries adjusted downward. But there was no significant turnover and little outward appearance of change, according to judges and others who deal with the office on a daily basis.

Since taking over, Dillinger has added about 15 employees to his office in addition to replacing the half-dozen or so who left. Seven of last year's new hires were attorneys, and two were social workers who Dillinger said will free up his assistants so they can do more courtroom work.

And he adds that two of the seven new attorneys are black and one is Hispanic. Regardless of the numbers, judges and others who deal with Dillinger's assistants regularly report that morale and efficiency in the office appear to have improved, while the quality of representation either has remained the same or improved slightly.

"It's fresh new blood and a lot of energy, and I think it has had a positive effect on the [assistant] public defenders -- all of them," said Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Judge Frank Quesada, who throughout Dillinger's first year in office served as the administrative judge for criminal courts in Clearwater.

The judge also praised Dillinger for watching out for the public's money. Quesada said the Pinellas-Pasco circuit is one of the few in the state where the public defender's office insists on collecting a special \$40 fee from each of its clients, money the judge said quickly adds up.

Quesada echoed the opinion of many who make their living at the Pinellas Criminal Justice Complex. The general consensus is that the 79 lawyers who represent indigent clients in Pinellas and Pasco counties are doing a good job. Dillinger recently compiled his own list of accomplishments during his first year in office.

At the top of the two-page list: "Open door policy." At the bottom: "Let's not forget the public defender shirts and hats."

In between, Dillinger credits his leadership for adjusting salaries "for fairness," for adding electronic and computerized support systems to the office, and for winning the freedom of an innocent man through the use of a search warrant.

Dillinger said no public defender in Florida, and possibly in the nation, ever has asked for and obtained a search warrant. Evidence turned up through the warrant convinced Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney Bernie McCabe to drop robbery charges in a series of motel holdups.

Dillinger said the work of his assistants who obtained the warrant and won their client's freedom is indicative of a new way of doing things in an office that had become stagnant after 35 years under Jagger.

"When we took office, the first thing we did was pull the pins on the door closers for Jagger's and his secretary's doors. Their doors were always closed," Dillinger said.

Some assistants with 15 years of experience had been in the boss' office only once or twice, he said, and Jagger never appeared in court.

Not so for Dillinger, who takes turns serving as the on-call attorney on weekends and who has been known to show up and voice his opinion when he thinks one of his assistants needs help in court.

McCabe, who also is known to appear in court from time to time, said Dillinger's takeover of the public defender's office was well-handled and caused no disruptions in the progress of ongoing cases.

Jagger did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Memo:

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