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Ed Monahan appointed to run the state's public defender system

Leaves post with Catholic Conference

BY DEBORAH YETTER • DYETTER@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM • AUGUST 13, 2008

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Ed Monahan, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, has been appointed to run the state's public defender system, where he worked previously for 28 years, including eight as deputy director.

Monahan, 57, of Lexington, said he regrets leaving the Catholic Conference -- the church's advocacy and policy arm in Kentucky -- where he has worked since 2004.

Monahan said he considers the work of the Department of Public Advocacy extremely important -- particularly as state budget cuts are forcing it to reduce staff and limit services to poor people charged with crimes.

"I believe the public defender agency needs continued good leadership," said Monahan, who is replacing the retiring Ernie Lewis. "These are very challenging times."

Gov. Steve Beshear announced Monahan's appointment yesterday as Public Advocate for Kentucky, a job that pays about \$102,000 a year. He will supervise a staff of more than 400 lawyers and support staff statewide.

Louisville Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz yesterday said he and Kentucky's other three bishops accepted Monahan's resignation with regret but are pleased to see him continuing in public service.

"He has done a stellar job for the Catholic Conference of Kentucky," Kurtz said. "We will miss him tremendously."

Kurtz said the bishops will appoint an interim director as they search for a new executive director.

Monahan said he doesn't see his new job as that different from work at the conference, which included lobbying lawmakers to promote the church's social justice policies.

"A lot of the work we did with the Catholic Conference was trying to help the poor and vulnerable and that's what public defenders do," Monahan said. "I see a lot of similarities."

Monahan will start his four-year term as public advocate Sept. 1.

Lewis, who worked at the department 31 years, including the last 12 as director, said he is pleased that he was able to expand the department statewide with full-time lawyers for all 120 Kentucky counties.

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Under his direction the office expanded from staff in 47 counties to 119. Jefferson County operates an independent public defender office although Lewis' agency provides two-thirds of the funding.

Lewis said he "profoundly regrets" leaving at a time his agency is facing a funding crisis. The budget lawmakers passed this year cuts \$2.3 million from the agency's \$40 million budget despite his appeals for more funds.

"For whatever reason, the General Assembly did not have the courage or the political will to do that," he said. "I think they failed."

Monahan said he realizes he's stepping into a difficult job, with poorly paid lawyers handling rapidly rising caseloads. Public defenders start at about \$38,700 a year and are juggling far more cases than they should under national ethics standards, Lewis said.

Monahan said he hopes policy-makers face the need to fund enough lawyers for impoverished clients, a constitutional obligation of the state.

"The consequence of not having enough money is that you can't get all the work done," he said. "It's a pretty simple equation."

Reporter Deborah Yetter can be reached at (502) 582-4228.

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OOPS, oly is only, and publis is public and the apostrophe should be after Ed.....sorry

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