

# Ex-Franklin leader returns to Tri-Cities. This time to help struggling Benton Co. program

BY CAMERON PROBERT UPDATED OCTOBER 03, 2024 9:20 AM |



Benton County commissioners have turned to two familiar faces to run its Office of Public Defense after a tumultuous summer. BOB BRAWDY *Tri-City Herald*

One of Franklin County's former administrators is coming back to the Tri-Cities to help sort out a faltering public defense system, but until he moves back another recently departed Franklin leader is filling in.

Benton County commissioners have turned to two familiar faces to run its Office of Public Defense after a tumultuous summer. Interim Manager Larry Zeigler and newly hired Manager Keith Johnson have been tasked with taking over a department that is struggling to find attorneys.

The county tapped Zeigler just weeks after he announced his retirement from leading Franklin County's OPD, and administrators said Johnson, the former Franklin County administrator, would take over the department in January.

The commissioners approved the new contract for Johnson on Tuesday. It comes with a \$216,000 per year salary.

Zeigler told the Tri-City Herald that he's focused on finding attorneys to fill about 10 to 12 empty spots between superior and district court.

While the felony-based superior court had some struggles with the sudden resignation of public defense Manager Charlie Dow and another attorney, the district court has a massive backlog of 700 to 800 cases, Zeigler said.

"We're not going to do it overnight," he said. "It's going to be incremental."

The commissioners also signed off on a plan to help attorneys pay off student loans for 10 years if they work for as a public defender. The assistance ranges from \$300 to \$500 a month depending on how long they stay.

"We've been working on the staff level to try and find ways to incentivize public defenders that are not just short-term fixes," Deputy County Administrator Matt Rasmussen told the commissioners.

It's unclear how much the change will help with their pay, which is what attorneys have said is the biggest problem with the contracts Benton County offers.

Many public defense attorneys work off of a contract that makes them responsible for paying for investigators, paralegals and other help out of the salary they receive from the county, according to a 2018 Washington State Bar report.

Benton County public defense has faced a trying year, including a shortage in defense attorneys that led to six people facing charges being released in June. The prosecutor's office also dropped charges against several other people.

Prosecutor Eric Eisinger has previously told the Tri-City Herald that his office has been able to make sure everyone charged has a public defender available, and is filing charges against some of the people they previously dropped them against.

## NEW MANAGER

Johnson, an attorney and accountant, came to Franklin County in 2015 by way of software company Oracle. He has a law degree from the University of Denver and is a certified public accountant in Idaho. He served as the director of the Department of Administration in Idaho before taking a job with Oracle.

For much of the period he worked for the county, there wasn't any conflict between him and the commissioners, but the relationship with the board took a turn for the worse after Rocky Mullen joined in 2021.

After two attempts to fire him, Johnson left the county in 2022 to take the city manager job in the community of Chickasha, OK. The move put him in top employee spot of the 17,000 person city just outside of Oklahoma City.

While he left a contentious position, he became the seventh city manager in less than eight years, the Southwest Ledger reported. He told the Ledger that he and his wife like the city, but the opportunity came along and he couldn't turn it down.

The decision came after the council approved a raise, according to a story from Chickasha Today.

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Read more at: <https://www.tri-cityherald.com/news/local/crime/article293333309.html#storylink=cpy>