

Experience matters in the courtroom

Three veteran prosecutors add depth to Umatilla County DA's Office

BY JOHN TILLMAN
Hermiston Herald

The Umatilla County District Attorney's Office is down three deputy prosecutors, but the return of three veterans since early 2021 and a new hire have eased staffing issues.

Daniel Pachico returned Feb. 1, 2021, as chief deputy for the DA's office in Pendleton. Jaclyn Jenkins departed from her service as assistant United States attorney in Portland and on April 1 began working again as chief deputy district attorney out of the Stafford Hansell Government Center in Hermiston. And Monte Ludington returned April 15 to his position as senior deputy in Pendleton.

District Attorney Dan Primus said the trio boosts the office's experience and productivity "immensely."

He said his office had been working with only five of the 10 attorney positions filled.

"Our allotment is 10.5 prosecutors, including myself," he said, and now six-and-a-half attorneys are working in the office and one works remotely.

THE VETERANS

Pachico left the DA's office for Legal Aid Services of Oregon in July 2020 because he said he wanted to work in the community.

"I didn't think I'd have to go against my former deputy colleagues," he said. "It was very important for me not to do defense work"

It was his decision to return to the DA's office on Feb. 1, 2021.

"Legal Aid was distanced during COVID. It didn't feel like walking into the office, when working from home. I missed



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Jaclyn Jenkins, Umatilla County chief deputy district attorney, works a case Wednesday, Aug. 3, 2022, in front of Circuit Judge Daniel Hill at the Stafford Hansell Government Center, Hermiston. Jenkins earlier this year returned to her former DA position after a stint as a federal prosecutor in Portland.

specific people as well. I had a wonderful boss (in Primus). His expectations were high, but the office provided great support, which made a demanding job more doable."

Pachico is slated to work in the Hermiston office with Jenkins, who grew up in Hermiston and came home to the community after law school. She first joined Umatilla County DA staff in 2009, and was promoted to chief deputy in its Hermiston office in 2015.

In 2019 she was Hermiston High School's Distinguished Alumna of the Year, and left for the federal post in early 2021. Umatilla County commissioners in January voted unanimously to rehire her in her former position. Primus said she took the helm of the Hermiston office on April 1.

Ludington joined the DA's of-

ice in February 2011 and in February 2019 left for private practice with the Pendleton-based firm Mautz & O'Hanlon. He also served as a Pendleton Municipal Court judge before returning to the DA's office in April.

"The dynamics were different (in 2019)," Ludington said. "I was maxed out unless I could serve as a chief deputy DA."

He explained that to advance as a prosecutor, he would have needed to move, but his wife's family lives in Pendleton, and they love being here. So he opted for civil practice.

Then the county decided to change its approach to hiring deputy DAs, he said.

"We used to hire young dep-

uties, who would get experience here, then typically leave," Ludington said. "The county then tried to get people who want to be here. Senior deputy DA is not an easy job, but you're paid to do the right thing. This is a fantastic place to work. It was the best move for my family."

Ludington also is Pendleton Little League president.

"I've worked with most of our deputies for a long time," he said. "We know and respect each other. We know our strengths and support each other. It's funny to look back to 2011, at my first collective bargaining experience here. The average lifespan of a deputy DA here then was under two-and-a-half years."



Yasser Marte/Hermiston Herald

Monte Ludington, Umatilla County senior deputy district attorney, works July 21, 2022, in court at the Umatilla County Courthouse, Pendleton. He returned to the DA's office in April after a period in private practice.

Now Primus has been here for more than 10 years, and Jenkins and Pachico even longer, Ludington said, and other deputies came here in 2014 or 2015.

The deputies' experience allows the DA's office to achieve just results while best utilizing county resources, he said.

"Turnover has costs," he pointed out. "Younger deputies are paid less, but how many months does it take to get up to speed? Then there's the type of case they can handle. It takes time to accumulate the experience necessary to handle major cases. Stability is worth the cost."

THE FRESHMAN PROSECUTOR

Blaire Lakatos is the office's newest deputy, also joining the staff in April. She graduated from law school in 2020 and was in Portland before joining Inter-mountain Public Defender Inc. in Pendleton for about a year during the pandemic.

"It was a decent paying job," she said. "It did not involve courtroom work, which I never envisioned doing. I looked into joining the DA office, but I'm a

moderate. I see both sides of issues. With that mentality, would prosecution be doable?"

Lakatos met Primus, and saw the veteran senior and chief deputies coming back, which helped her make up her mind.

"Now I live in a courtroom," she said. "In a rural area, you can get more experience. You may start with petty theft, but can soon dive into felonies and do it all. From the 7:45 a.m. meeting on, I get support."

Lakatos credited her colleagues with helping transition her from the defense side.

"They allow me to have discretion and never be too busy," she said. "Even the support staff are great. The team made it possible for me to hit the ground running, since they knew judges and courtrooms."

Lakatos said she did enjoy her year with the public defender.

"I watched the deputy DAs, and saw how tired they were, when at their most short-handed," she recalled, "yet what good work they did. Now I'm very much enjoying working with them."

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