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Montgomery County commissioners appoint members to independent public defender advisory board

Board will play a key role in selecting a permanent county chief public defender



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Montco courthouse

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NORRISTOWN — Nine Montgomery County citizens were recently appointed to an advisory board that will play a key role in selecting a permanent county chief public defender and help to develop best practices for the operation of the public defender's office.

"Every person has the right to a robust defense regardless of their ability to pay and it is so important that our public defender's office has the resources that they need and the support that they need to carry out that most important duty," county commissioners' Chairwoman Valerie Arkoosh said as the commissioners unanimously appointed nine volunteer members to the newly-established Montgomery County Office of the Public Defender Advisory Board.

The commissioners said the nine members include a variety of community representatives from diverse backgrounds.

Those appointed include Maria Maneos, a visual artist, representing a current or former client of the county Office of the Public Defender.

Five licensed attorneys who currently practice in Montgomery County were appointed to the board. They are: Jeffrey Abramowitz, executive director, Justice Partnerships, JEVS; Katie Lin Daly, of Curtin & Heefner, LLP; Eddie Graham, president of the Springfield Board of Commissioners & president of the NAACP Cheltenham Branch; Geoffrey Hood, of Horsham; and R. Emmett Madden, of The Philly Lawyers.

Emily Rich, a clinical supervisor with Creative Health Services, was appointed as a community or affinity group representative associated with an organization advocating for causes related to social justice and/or criminal justice reform.

Bernadine Ahonkhai, founder of the Coalition for Racial Equity and Social Justice, was appointed as a representative of a non-profit or senior leader working in the areas of mental health, substance use, housing, domestic violence, or veterans' affairs.

Rounding out the nine-member advisory board is Paul Heaton, academic director, the University of Pennsylvania Law School's Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice, who represents the commissioners' appointee.

"I'm glad to see this coming to a culmination," said Kenneth E. Lawrence Jr., commissioners' vice-chairman.

“I appreciate the effort put into all of this and I hope there is success and productivity of the advisory board and I look forward to hearing from them,” added Commissioner Joseph C. Gale.

The independent advisory board is tasked with providing the commissioners with at least two candidates for the chief public defender’s post. While the advisory board will make a recommendation, under state law, the county commissioners must approve that hire.

Additionally, the advisory board will support the successful operation of the Office of the Public Defender and provide input on policy, priorities and legislation that impact the justice system. The board also will identify opportunities to advance equity in the criminal justice system on the local, state, and federal levels and serve as a resource hub and informational clearinghouse for all lawyers in the county who have an indigent defense practice, officials said.

The advisory board will meet monthly, and each member is appointed for a term of three years.

The commissioners thanked the members of an independent committee appointed in March for their work to solicit applications for the advisory board.

That nominating committee included: Keir Bradford-Grey, partner at Montgomery McCracken, who is a former county chief public defender and also was the chief defender of the Defender Association of Philadelphia; former county Judge Joseph P. Walsh, a founding member of the Lansdale firm Walsh Panico LLP; Anna M. Durbin, a criminal defense lawyer; Deah Gerard-May, president NAACP Ambler Branch; and Dr. Vernon Ross, Jr., who is director of inclusion & diversity at SAIC, a technology and engineering company, and is a member of the faith community.

Members of the nominating committee were not eligible to apply for or serve on the nine-member advisory board.

Walsh explained the nominating committee received more than 30 applications from citizens who showed an interest in being on the advisory board. Between April and August, the nominating committee interviewed 20 applicants for the advisory board and the committee presented 14 potential candidates for the commissioners’ consideration. The commissioners selected the nine members during their public meeting last week.

“We had a lot of people that reached out with amazing qualifications who wanted to be a part of this process. We worked a lot of hours. All of the interviews were a half-hour in length. We had standard stock questions for each candidate so that we had consistency in how we interviewed the various individuals,” Walsh explained to the commissioners during the public meeting.

“It was a great experience,” Walsh added.

Donna Richemond, Montgomery County’s chief of diversity, equity and inclusion, Alana Hook, chief of policy and social services for the public defender’s office, and Yvonne Montgomery, senior assistant solicitor, served as non-voting members of the nominating committee.

Under state law, the chief public defender and assistants are appointed by the county commissioners. The commissioners hope to appoint a permanent chief public defender later this year.

In February 2020, former Chief Public Defender Dean M. Beer and Deputy Chief Public Defender Keisha Hudson were let go from their posts during a shakeup in the office. They were replaced by longtime public defenders Carol Sweeney and Gregory Nester who currently serve as interim co-chief deputy public defenders.

At the time, the commissioners said in a statement that they support justice reform and “remain wholly committed to supporting the vitally important work of the Public Defender’s Office and their dedication to defending the Constitutional rights of indigent individuals accused of violating the law.”

The recommendation for the formation of an advisory board to select a permanent chief public defender was a key component contained in a May 2021 report, “Strengthening the Office of Public Defender,” developed by the Temple University Beasley School of Law’s Sheller Center for Social Justice as part of a \$30,000 contract awarded by the county commissioners in July 2020.

The center was tasked with helping to develop best practices for the governance and operation of the public defender’s office under the current legal framework in Pennsylvania.

Currently, officials explained, Pennsylvania does not independently fund public defender offices through state budgets, leaving counties with the responsibility of funding those offices and there’s no requirement that counties do it in the same manner.

Absent a change in state law, officials said they are working to balance the office’s independence with the county’s oversight role.

The commissioners had asked the Sheller Center at Temple to take a look at the public defender's office and provide recommendations on how the county could implement best practices given the statutory requirements that the county is operating under in Pennsylvania.



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