



## Assistant district attorneys, public defenders awarded salary increases

By *Brian Lazenby* Staff Writer

With the exception of annual cost-of-living increases, the Tennessee General Assembly has awarded assistant district attorneys and public defenders their first salary increase in more than 10 years.

"The focus of district attorneys throughout the state and the (Tennessee) District Attorneys General Conference for many years has been to increase salaries for assistants so we can recruit and retain talented prosecutors," Hamilton County District Attorney Bill Cox said. "We've had difficulty filling positions because of the pay scale."

According to information provided by the Tennessee Public Safety Coalition, new assistant district attorneys and public defenders earned about \$31,000 a year under the old scale, while the national average was about \$38,250.

Under the new pay scale, new assistant prosecutors and public defenders will start at \$38,124 a year.

Mr. Cox said attorneys coming out of law school with large amounts of student debt often opt for private firms because the pay is much better.

Kay Brown, a career services adviser for the University of Tennessee College of Law, said the class of 2003 earned an average starting salary of more than \$60,000.

"That's taking into account everything from a two-attorney firm to a 200-attorney firm," she said. "Even the smaller firms' salaries are beginning to come up now, but the bigger firms have always been pretty high."

The law, which took effect July 1, increased entry level salaries about \$6,000 a year and increased about \$1,400 each year thereafter through seven years. Current assistants with the district attorney's and public defender's office with less than seven year's seniority also benefited from the raises. After seven years, the pay scale remains the same, officials said. Mr. Cox said the increase was badly needed.

"We're still not on an even keel with private practice firms, but it is still an improvement," he said.

Jeff Henry, director of research and training for the Tennessee District Public Defenders Conference, said previous starting salaries of about \$31,000 are "unrealistic" when trying to recruit new assistant public defenders.

"This has been something that has been needed for a number of years if we are to become an attractive option for new lawyers," he said.

Wally Kirby, executive director of the Tennessee District Attorneys General Conference, said the salary increase will help retain prosecutors beyond the first few years.

"Where we really have trouble is the first five or six years," he said. "Lawyers come to a district attorney's office and get a lot of trial experience quickly, and then they go to a private firm where they can make a whole lot more money."

Mr. Kirby said it is a muchneeded improvement.

"It's not as good as we would like it to be, but it is sure better than it was," he said.

The State House of Representatives version of the bill awarding raises to assistant public defenders was sponsored by Rep. Frank Buck, D-Doweltown. He said he feels the raises are "appropriate."

"Certainly the assistant district attorneys and public defenders both need better pay," he said. "It's important that we have competent people defending criminals as we do prosecuting them."

Officials said the pay increase puts Tennessee more in line with what prosecutors and public defenders are earning in other states.

"This will increase our ability to attract talented prosecutors to prosecute cases in our community," Mr. Cox said.

Hamilton County District Public Defender Ardena Garth did not return calls seeking comment. E-mail Brian Lazenby at blazenby@timesfreepress.com



Bill Cox

**Raising the bar**

The Tennessee General Assembly has awarded assistant district attorneys and assistant public defenders a salary increase in hopes of making the positions more attractive to students coming out of law school.

	Previous salary	New salary
Entry level	\$31,044	\$38,124
One year	\$33,432	\$40,524
Two years	\$35,856	\$42,924
Three years	\$41,808	\$45,324
Four years	\$44,184	\$47,724
Five years	\$46,572	\$50,124
Six years	\$48,984	\$52,524
Seven years	\$51,360	\$54,924

SOURCE: HAMILTON COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

STAFF GRAPHIC BY LAURA L. WALKER