



## The Chairman's Corner

by

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### CONFLICT DEFENDER

In April, the Columbia County Board of Supervisors formally established by local law the Office of Conflict Defender. As I stated in a subsequent letter to all county, town, and village justices in the county, "This office is next in line to handle indigent defense in criminal cases and family court matters after the Public Defender's Office has identified a general conflict that exists within their office, leaving them unable to handle that particular matter."

The Conflict Defenders Office operates separately and distinctly from the Public Defender's Office.

Should a conflict exist that renders the Conflict Defender's office unable to handle the matter, the Court would then be in a position to assign a private attorney under County Law 18b. I anticipate in the future that a county 18b Administrator position will be formed to operate as a point person for the Court.

Mark S. Portin has been appointed to fill the position of Chief Conflict Defender. In addition, he currently serves as a Town of Ghent judge, and has served as Chatham village justice and as a Hudson City Court judge, as well as in the Columbia County District Attorney's office. Until recently, he maintained a law office in East Greenbush.

Thirty years ago, after graduating from Hamilton College and University of Toledo Law School, Conflict Defender Portin practiced law for a short period, then, calling on a background in the lamp business, he started a lamp company in Hudson that for a period employed approximately 15 people. By the late 1990s, following a "meteoric rise and a meteoric fall" as a lamp maker, he had returned to practicing law.

Joining him in the Conflict Defender's office are assistant conflict defenders Bethene Lindstedt (Family Court only), Joyce Crawford, and Kyle Patzwahl. Kami Ressler serves as confidential administrator.

When, in 2016, Conflict Defender Portin served as the county's first alternate conflict defender, he said of that time period, "The Office of the Conflict Defender was not set-up in the manner that was consistent with the requirements for the formation of the Office of the Conflict Defender. We were individual entities, but because we functioned as independent contractors, when we were assigned cases, we were assigned under county law 18B. We still provided the same legal services and reported the same way."

However, on the heels of a significant lawsuit, he explained, New York State dedicated funds to ensuring that the proper structure was established for providing service to indigent legal clients across all counties. And whereas once conflict defenders provided services solely to criminal clients, those involved in family court matters are also now covered by the Office of Conflict Defender.

"Since April, we've been taking cases," said Conflict Defender Portin. "It's just growing. We get calls every day to take Family Court or criminal cases."

The Conflict Defender's Office is located at 401 State Street, Hudson. The phone number is 518-697-3411 and the email address is [conflictdefender@columbiacountyny.com](mailto:conflictdefender@columbiacountyny.com).