

Federal Defender Services of Idaho leaving Moscow

Most employees of nonprofit organization that handles appeals of death row inmates will move to Boise

By David Johnson of the Tribune

Wednesday, February 25, 2009



Bruce Livingston

MOSCOW - The Moscow office of the Federal Defender Services of Idaho will be moving in May from here to Boise, officials confirmed Tuesday.

The office, called the Capital Habeas Unit, employs 16 people, and all those jobs will be lost to the local economy. The unit was established here in 1997 to defend the last appeals of death row inmates in Idaho and Washington.

The unit's annual budget is in the neighborhood of \$1 million, said Moscow attorney Tim Gresback, who serves on the nonprofit organization's board of directors.

Attorney Bruce Livingston of Moscow, who has been with the unit from the beginning, confirmed the pending move stemmed from efforts to consolidate office operations. He asked that additional questions about the move be directed to Dick Rubin, Federal Defender Services executive officer in Boise. Rubin did not immediately return calls.

The Moscow unit, located at 317 W. Sixth St., employs three attorneys, three paralegals, three investigators, an administrator, a legal secretary, a clerical assistant, two fellowship attorneys, two hourly employees and one intern, according to the Federal Defender Services Web site.

Gresback said most of the employees will be moving to Boise and keep their jobs. The unit is currently down to two attorneys, but officials are actively trying to fill the third position. An announcement of the opening, carried on the Internet, mentions the Boise headquarters office and a branch office in Pocatello, but not the Moscow unit.

Losing the unit, Gresback said, will have an adverse impact on University of Idaho law students. "In a perfect world, there could have been a lot of opportunity for law students here with a lot of the appeals and legal research."

Moscow will also be losing some of its more educated residents, Gresback said. And the financial compensation the unit employees received had a significant positive effect on the local economy, he said. "Sixteen jobs matters these days. With that kind of staff and that many lawyers, it's not uncommon for them to have a gross budget of \$1 million."

Federal Defender Services of Idaho started in 1994. Such organizations are established throughout the country under federal law as nonprofit corporations funded by annual grants from Congress. A board of directors oversees operations. The grant money is administered out of Washington, D.C., and all offices are dedicated to ensuring indigent defendants receive Sixth Amendment rights to effective legal counsel. Case loads at the various defender services offices include everything from petty offenses to capital cases.

Livingston confirmed the Moscow office is currently representing 12 Idaho death row inmates and has represented Washington death row inmates in the past. "We handle their last appeals," he said.

Professional move aside, Livingston said it will be hard for him on a personal level to leave Moscow. "In this economic climate, I felt it important to support my family and keep my job." In addition to his legal work, Livingston has been active in civic matters here. He is president of both the Latah Economic Development Council and the Moscow Civic Association, and past president of the Moscow Arts Commission and Rendezvous in the Park.

In addition to Livingston, attorney Oliver Loewy of Moscow, works at the unit. The vacant attorney job was created when Joan Fisher left to work in California.

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