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Public defender: So far, so good

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A lot of people may have had mixed emotions when a young and relatively unknown Matt Shirk was elected public defender a little more than a year ago.

On the positive side, he seemed capable and, having served five years as an assistant public defender, certainly wasn't without qualifications.

Besides, it was good to see a graduate of Florida Coastal School of Law succeed.

But, on the negative side, his experience was somewhat limited; at age 35, he had been a lawyer only nine years and had never defended a murder case, according to a Times-Union article.

It's still too early to draw any lasting conclusions, of course, but his first year has been impressive.

Shirk told The Times-Union editorial board recently that he entered office with a commitment to what he called "the three Es"

- Efficient administration.
- Effective advocacy.
- Engagement in the community.

He says he hired lawyers with more experience, and at less cost, than those whom they replaced.

His office has defended more clients in court than it did in previous years.

He's using videoconferencing to make better use of personnel.

To save money, he's converting to a "completely paperless" office.

And, he's switching from law books, which constantly need expensive updates, to a completely electronic library system.

His work in the community has included a drive to provide school supplies for homeless children, raising money for charity and a free legal advice at the Sulzbacher Center.

Shirk seems to be interested in looking out for both his clients and the taxpayers.

If he continues on his current path in years to come, that probably will be good news for residents of the Fourth Judicial Circuit - which includes Clay, Duval and Nassau counties.

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