

Thompson: Let's help child witnesses

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Richard Thompson's first change as Oakland County prosecutor will be aimed at easing the trauma for child witnesses in abuse and molestation cases.

"We will assign a specific assistant prosecutor who will follow the case through the system," said Thompson, 50, who took his oath of office Tuesday but doesn't succeed L. Brooks Patterson until Jan. 1.

"Right now, a child may be questioned by three, four or five different prosecutors. This (new program) will eliminate dealing with all the strangers.

"It will make the child feel more comfortable. It will make the family feel more comfortable."

THOMPSON, in a brief interview

following a 45-minute ceremony in the county Board of Commissioners' auditorium, said he has been working on the plan for a month.

"We're developing a program with the Child Abuse and Neglect Council, where they will put in for a grant through the Skillman Foundation to develop a child advocacy specialist," he said.

"We want to cut down the number of interviews (of child witnesses). Right now many agencies have to interview them."

The Senate Judiciary Committee, headed by Rudy Nichols, R-Waterford, who was in the audience, worked on bills to allow videotaping the testimony of child witnesses to reduce the number of interrogations.

Thompson said, however, there is "a question of constitutionality surrounding them. We will continue to explore use of videotapes."

THE PROPOSAL to allow videotapes came in 1987 from Sen. Connie Blustfeld, R-Maple City.

Youth workers told moving stories of children who had to tell their stories of sexual abuse by men seven or eight times — to a teacher, a social worker, a police officer, a prosecutor and a cross-examining defense lawyer. Each time they were forced to tell the story, the children felt guiltier and guiltier for getting an adult in trouble until, finally, the kids were literally too unnerved to testify in court.

Thompson's plan to use a single member of the prosecutor's staff won't necessarily reduce the repetitions, but will allow the child to see a familiar and supportive face each time.

THE SWEARING-IN ceremony was a jovial one.

After 16 years as chief assistant prosecutor in the shadow of the flamboyant Patterson, Thompson won election to succeed his boss, who is retiring into private law practice.

State Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy, Thompson's campaign manager through a hard-fought four-man Republican primary, joked that his candidate "has been smiling lately."

Sheriff John Nichols, elected with the Republican slate to four-year terms, said, "I've seen a change in Dick Thompson. I caught him smiling a couple of minutes ago."

Both jokes brought laughter from an audience of several hundred, to whom Thompson is famed for a perpetually somber countenance.

Patterson, in his final 10 days in office, added, "I'm not a lame duck. I'm a has-been. But it's been a great 16 years, and in it I have focused on

one thing: I'm the victim's attorney."

Patterson called Thompson "an impeccably honest workaholic who's been part of the program."

THOMPSON WAS grateful, as usual, for the Patterson endorsement, but he also underscored Cruce's help.

"The political pundits doubted I had the experience and organization to run a successful primary. There were probably right. Then along came Doug Cruce, (who) taught me the practical aspects of running a campaign."

On a more reflective note, Thompson, the son of Armenian immigrants, said his late father, Albert, would have been pleased at the way Americans in recent weeks aided that earthquake-torn section of the Soviet Union.



Richard Thompson there's a change

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