

County public defender retires; Latina immigrant to replace him

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***Editor's note:** This story has been updated to reflect the involvement of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors in approving the county executive officer's appointment for public defender.*

The head of the Ventura County Public Defender's Office is retiring Friday, and the person chosen to replace him is the first woman in county history to lead the agency.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday unanimously approved Assistant Public Defender Claudia Bautista's appointment to the top post of the county office that represents indigent individuals accused of crimes.

Bautista, who technically takes over Saturday, is not only breaking gender barriers but she is also the first immigrant and person of color in county history to hold the position.

"For me, this is sort of the American Dream come true," Bautista said.

Claudia Bautista's background

Bautista and her family came to the United States from Mexico when she was 2. The native Spanish speaker said she and her family were undocumented immigrants for 16 years until a law signed by President Ronald Reagan gave her family amnesty and made them permanent residents, Bautista said.

Bautista has a bachelor's degree from UCLA and her law degree from University of Wisconsin Law. She started in the public defender's office in 2001 where she litigated serious felony, homicide and misdemeanor cases until 2014. She went on to serve for two years as a supervisor from 2014 to 2016. Bautista then served as a chief deputy public defender before being promoted to assistant public defender in 2017.



A recruitment and interview process was done by the County Executive Office and Bautista, whose entire career has been in the local public defender's office, was the right fit for the job, said County Executive Officer Mike Powers.

He recommended her appointment to the board and called her selection a "great milestone" for the county.

"She is, of course, the most qualified person for the job, but it is also incredibly meaningful that she is the first woman, the first Latina and Mexican-born public defender in our county's history," Powers said in an email to The Star. "She is a remarkable person and incredibly passionate about providing excellent legal representation to the most vulnerable members of our community."

Successor Todd Howeth 'thrilled' with selection

Bautista will take the reins from Todd Howeth, who was appointed public defender in 2017. Howeth has worked for the office since 1990.

He said Bautista's background will give the indigent community in the county a "new and powerful voice." Howeth said he couldn't be prouder to see Claudia succeed him and of the dedicated public servants in the public defender's office.

"I am thrilled that the board has selected Claudia Bautista to succeed me as the new Ventura County Public Defender. Ms. Bautista is an exceptional attorney and leader who is exactly the right person to meet the challenges ahead," Howeth said in a statement to The Star.

"As a career public defender, I have seen firsthand that the criminal justice system has a disproportionate impact on communities of color. Our nation, state and county have begun the painful process of coming to terms with this reality—we are very fortunate that the Board of Supervisors selected Ms. Bautista as our new Public Defender."