

## TEXAS INDIGENT DEFENSE COMMISSION

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### **Study Establishes the Efficacy of Public Defenders in Wichita County**

AUSTIN – Today, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission and Wichita County jointly released [a study](#) providing evidence that the county’s public defender can provide high-quality indigent defense counsel while also containing costs.

“Wichita County has one of the most well-established public defender systems in the state,” said Sharon Keller, Chair of the Texas Indigent Defense Commission. “There is a lot we can learn from them about what a public defender office can potentially become with maturity and experience.”

The [study](#), led by the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University, involved a survey of court-appointed attorneys as well as analyses of over five years of criminal justice and court records. The findings in the report show clients represented by the public defender have better outcomes. They are more likely to have their case dismissed, and therefore have a lower chance of being found guilty.

Public Defender James Rasmussen explains, “Our attorneys are supported by two full-time investigators. They are out talking to witnesses or finding videotape immediately after a person is arrested. In instances where there is not strong evidence, we work to get the case dismissed.” The higher dismissal rate helps the county to avoid about \$204 per case in court processing, prosecution, and pretrial detention costs per case, the study shows.

A survey found public defenders spend more time with each defendant than other court-appointed lawyers. Even so, cost data demonstrates they still cost the county less per case. County Judge Woody Gossom, who invited researchers to study the program, was not surprised. “Indigent defense is a big part of our county budget, so I think efficiency is an important objective, along with providing a good quality of counsel to people who can’t afford an attorney. The public defender helps us accomplish both.”

Interest in public defender offices has been increasing in Texas, as the number of full-time public defender offices has risen from seven to 19 over the past decade. Over 30 counties now have a trial-level public defender program, and more than 150 counties are served by some form of public defender office.

For more information on Wichita County go to <http://www.co.wichita.tx.us> and the Commission’s website is available at <http://www.txcourts.gov/tidc>.