



# Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense

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## Inside:

- **New Study: Mental Health**

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## Special Edition Newsletter

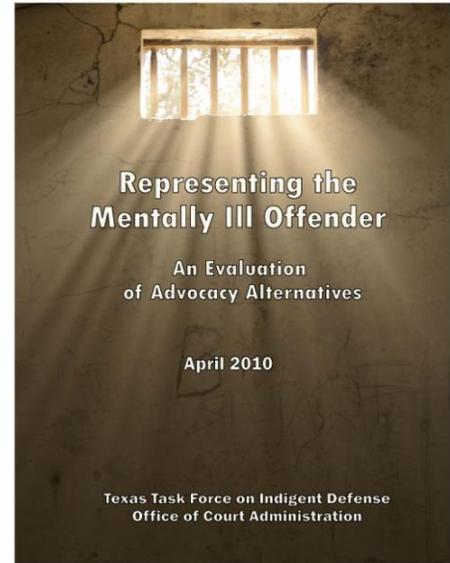
### New Study Released regarding Offenders with Mental Illness

The Task Force released a study this week showing that criminal offenders with mental impairments who are treated instead of jailed are less likely to reoffend for up to eighteen months. Moreover, offenders suffering from one of the three serious mental illnesses--major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia--were twice as likely than a control group to receive probation rather than jail time if represented by a mental health public defender.

The Task Force has provided funding to Dallas, El Paso, Travis, Lubbock and Fort Bend counties to establish mental health programs to represent mentally impaired offenders. With access to more resources and in an effort to slow the recidivism of mentally impaired offenders, counties are adopting new local diversion and treatment alternatives. In this climate of change and innovation, little objective analysis has been conducted to guide counties in their planning.

The Task Force applied for and received a grant from the State Justice Institute for a research project entitled "Representing the Mentally Ill Offender: An Evaluation of Advocacy Alternatives." The multi-year study was conducted in collaboration with the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M to document the effectiveness of emerging pre-trial interventions and compare outcomes for mentally ill misdemeanor defendants represented by the mental health public defenders versus those represented by appointed counsel.

The study found that engagement in treatment can potentially reduce future justice system involvement by half. Mental health courts and mental health public defenders both seek to take advantage of criminal justice system contact to facilitate access to treatment and reduce repeat offending. These programs use different methods designed for different types of people, but ultimately they offer mutually complementary ways to improve outcomes for individual defendants and the criminal justice system as a whole.



“It’s really a win-win for everyone involved,” said Jim Bethke, Task Force director. “The defendant gets linked in to the local treatment system and that reduces their chance of re-offending. The county ends up putting fewer people in jail, which saves money.”

This study documented the impact of mental health courts and mental health public defenders based on multiple sources of information, including sites visits for qualitative information, analysis of six years of mental health and criminal justice data, and a survey of defense attorneys at each of the three study sites (Dallas, Tarrant and Travis). The research focused on the role of defense attorneys both as a member of the mental health court team and as defense counsel operating in an adversarial court context.

The [study and press release](#) are available on the Task Force website: [www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid](http://www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid).