

## **TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE**

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### **STATE TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE AWARDS GRANTS TO FORT BEND, PARKER AND WICHITA COUNTIES**

AUSTIN – At its meeting today, the Task Force on Indigent Defense (Task Force) awarded \$572,024 in grants to Fort Bend, Parker and Wichita counties for grants to improve indigent defense.

Fort Bend County was awarded \$517,824 to establish a mental health public defender office to serve indigent defendants with mental illness.

“Mentally ill defendants present special challenges to their attorneys, as well as to the criminal courts system,” said Sharon Keller, presiding judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals and Task Force chair. “The specialized skills and support services that will be developed for the Ft. Bend mental health public defender office will help assure better outcomes for the clients and the community as a whole.”

Staffed with attorneys, case workers and social workers, the office will represent defendants with mental illness in misdemeanor cases. The program will help connect them to available services and treatment options. The office also will seek solutions to get and keep defendants with mental illness out of the criminal justice system.

“Establishing the Fort Bend County mental health public defender office is a major step forward in ensuring fairness in our legal system for a segment of the population that is often overlooked and underserved,” said Rodney Ellis, State Senator, District 13. “This office will go a long way toward protecting the constitutional right to counsel, as well as connecting mentally ill persons with services and resources that should reduce their involvement with the criminal justice system in the future.”

Dr. Tony Fabelo, who is Director of Research of the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments, has been working with Fort Bend officials to develop more effective diversion strategies for defendants with mental illness and said that “The mental health public defender funded by the Task Force supports local efforts already underway to create a more effective system to identify mentally ill persons who pose little threat to public safety and divert them into treatment.”

The Task Force also awarded \$33,450 to Parker County to fund an indigent defense coordinator position. The indigent defense coordinator will be bilingual in Spanish and English and screen defendants to determine if they are eligible for a court appointed attorney. The indigent defense coordinator will appoint counsel for those who qualify and will ensure attorneys contact their clients within the legally required timeframe.

“Indigent defense coordinators have proven to be effective tools for local jurisdictions and Parker County is to be commended for this improvement to its process,” said Judge Keller.

The Task Force also awarded \$20,750 to Wichita County for a video teleconferencing system to connect the jail and the public defender office to increase attorney-client communication.

“This video teleconferencing system will allow secure and more frequent visitation between public defenders and their clients as well as reduce travel time and expense going to the remote jail facility,” said Woody Gossom, Wichita County Judge. “In addition, the system will be made available to private and court appointed attorneys.”

Additional information available at Task Force's web site: <http://www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid/>