

TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE

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AUSTIN – The Task Force on Indigent Defense awarded discretionary grants totaling more than \$2.1 million to improve indigent defense in Texas counties.

“These grants help counties try innovative new ways to comply with the Fair Defense Act,” said Tarrant County Commissioner Glen Whitley, a member of the Task Force.

Travis County received a new multi-year discretionary grant, beginning with \$500,000 this year, to establish a public defender office to serve indigent defendants with serious mental illness. Staffed with attorneys and case workers, the office will represent defendants with mental health issues in their criminal 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.

“I commend the local officials in Travis County for putting forth a solid proposal to establish the first free-standing mental health public defender office in the state,” said Sharon Keller, presiding judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals and Task Force chair. “This program will help provide appropriate representation to a population that is challenging all areas of the criminal justice system.”

“We have been brainstorming over the past several years about how to improve the quality of legal defense for mental health clients,” said Travis County Judge Sam Biscoe. “This grant is a big piece of that solution for us.”

Willacy and Kaufman counties were both awarded new multi-year discretionary grants to create new public defender offices. Willacy County, in the lower Rio Grande Valley, was awarded \$189,664 to start its office. Simon Salinas, Willacy County judge, said: “We really appreciate the state helping this county serve its poor and improving the representation.”

Kaufman County, near Dallas, will receive \$180,256. Howard Tygrett, Kaufman County state district judge, said: “This grant allows us to provide for the constitutional rights of people in our county more effectively.”

Lubbock County was awarded \$46,533 for a video conferencing system. “Video conferencing systems are the future of a lot of indigent defense processes,” said Thomas V. Head, Lubbock County judge. “This grant is great news moving us towards that future.”

Five multi-year discretionary grants for new direct client services were continued from last year in Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Hidalgo, Limestone, and Val Verde counties totaling more than \$1.2 million.

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

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