

TAC recognizes county's public defenders

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AUSTIN – Kaufman County's Public Defender Office is one of 24 county programs around the state to be honored this week by the Texas Association of Counties (TAC) Leadership Foundation during TAC's annual conference in Austin.

The programs were selected to receive high honors for innovation, achievement and delivery of service in the 2008 County Best Practice Awards, which recognize county initiatives that serve as a model to others and save taxpayer monies.

"People in counties across Texas are coming up with such creative solutions," said TAC Leadership Foundation Chairwoman Carol Autry. "Counties have so few streams of revenue, and every good idea that can be shared is terribly important."

Kaufman County's program is being honored for Outstanding Achievement in Public Safety and Corrections.

With recent population growth, Kaufman County has quickly moved from being a rural to mid-sized county and is experiencing everything that goes with it. In a 3-year period, people who qualified for indigent defense doubled from 630 to 1,247 people. Associated costs to the county skyrocketed from \$200,000 to \$1.2 million per year. The increased costs stemmed not only from the population shift but from rising indigent defense costs as well.

Utilizing \$190,000 from a task force discretionary grant, the county became the first Texas mid-size county to establish a comprehensive public defenders office with two public defenders, an investigator and secretary. The grant requires that the public defender see indigent defendants within 24 hours.

Andrew Jordan, its chief public defender, said that the office initially focused on reducing jail overcrowding. This initiative paid off. Since November 2007, the average daily population has shrunk from 430 to 225-250. Since it costs about \$40 a day to house inmates, the reduction in jail population created a huge savings. And with the extra space, the Sheriff is now renting out roughly 70 beds to other counties.

During its first year, the county's cost for indigent defense was cut in half from \$1.2 million to \$600,000. Through reductions in inmate population, county taxpayers saved \$2.8 million. The county also gained \$100,000 from keeping other county inmates.

The staff of the new Kaufman County Public Defenders Office also take great pride in the fact that the poorest person in their county has the same access to the justice system and that their rights are just as vigorously protected as the richest.