



TEXAS INDIGENT DEFENSE COMMISSION

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TIDC Awards Grant to Fund Public Defender Program in Willacy County

Austin – The Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC) today awarded a two year grant for \$313,308 to provide funding for the Willacy County Public Defender Office (WPDO). Willacy County is currently facing a financial crisis due to the termination of a large Federal Bureau of Prisons contract with the Willacy County Correctional Facility. The funds awarded today will permit the county to continue operating the program for the next two years and will cover half the cost of operating the program. TIDC Chair, **Judge Sharon Keller** said, “This award was made possible thanks to the Legislature’s appropriation of new General Revenue funding for indigent defense, as well as new authority provided to TIDC by the passage of **SB 1057**.” That legislation addresses sustainability grants to support regional public defender programs. It was authored by **Senator Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa** and was sponsored in the House by Commission member **Representative Abel Herrero**. **Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr.**, whose senate district includes Willacy County, said, “I’m pleased that the Commission has taken the initiative to implement **SB 1057** in a way that will positively benefit counties that might otherwise struggle to provide effective indigent defense services.” **Senator Lucio** added, “As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Intergovernmental Relations, I look forward to working with the Commission and other agencies to help Texas better address the needs of our counties.”

The WPDO was created in 2007 with grant funds from TIDC to represent poor people charged with crimes and has been instrumental in maintaining Willacy County’s compliance with the Fair Defense Act. **Willacy County Judge Aurelio Guerra** said “Over the past eight years the public defender’s office has become an invaluable part of the local indigent defense delivery system. We are grateful to TIDC for providing this funding because without it we would not be able to sustain the program.”

The WPDO is operated by Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) under a contract with Willacy County. The funds will be used to join the existing regional public defender program currently administered by Bee County, which also contracts with TRLA to serve as public defender in three counties: Bee, Live Oak, and McMullen. **Chief Public Defender Abner Burnett** added “Willacy County has wholeheartedly worked with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid in an effort to comply with the standards of indigent defense set by the state. This has consistently been done without compromising either the responsibilities of the public defender on behalf the client or that of the district attorney on behalf of the State of Texas.”

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