



TEXAS TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE

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TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE ANNOUNCES \$90,000 GRANT FROM THE STATE JUSTICE INSTITUTE TO STUDY CRIMINAL JUSTICE MENTAL HEALTH PROCESSING SERVICES

AUSTIN – The Task Force on Indigent Defense has been granted \$90,000 by the State Justice Institute to analyze how mentally ill defendants are served in three Texas counties with pilot programs to determine whether a statewide process should be implemented.

Working with the Office of Court Administration, the Task Force will use the grant to study model programs in Dallas, Tarrant and Travis counties.

From the study, a joint project with the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University and the National Center for State Courts, the Task Force will develop a proposal for a statewide approach to work with offenders who suffer from mental illnesses. A 2006 report by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics found nearly a quarter of state prison and jail inmates reported they had a mental health problem and had been locked up three or more times.

“The National Center for State Courts is very pleased to bring its national court operations expertise to assist in the evaluation of unique approaches in working with mental-health offenders in the justice system” said Laura Klaversma, court services operations manager for the National Center for State Courts.

The frequency of their incarceration makes these defendants familiar in the nation’s courtrooms.

“The increasing numbers of people with mental illness appearing in criminal courts, and the frequency with which these people cycle through our prisons and jails, has significant implications for the administration of our judicial system,” said Sharon Keller, presiding judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals and Task Force chair. “This study will make recommendations that can help courts identify mentally ill persons in the court system and more effectively address, as appropriate to the particular case, the mental health needs of this population.”

Last year Judge Keller created a Mental Health Task Force to address the courts’ problems with mentally ill people in criminal proceedings. The Mental Health Task Force is part of a national project to improve how the mentally ill are handled in the criminal justice system.

“This project is a unique opportunity nationally to develop evidence-based practices for public defense systems to more effectively divert mentally ill offenders from further

involvement with the justice system” said Dr. Tony Fabelo, research director of the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments and a leader of the project’s advisory committee.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, an Indigent Defense Task Force member, said his county has been in the forefront of efforts to try to divert mentally ill defendants from criminal proceedings when the county can.

“By documenting the successes of these programs and promoting their dissemination,” Whitley said, “this project will help other counties find more effective and cost-efficient strategies.”

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