

TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE

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STATE TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE AWARDS GRANTS FOR NEW WEST TEXAS REGIONAL PUBLIC DEFENDER FOR CAPITAL MURDER CASES AND TEXARKANA BASED REGIONAL PUBLIC DEFENDER

AUSTIN – At its meeting today, the Task Force on Indigent Defense (Task Force) awarded a grant to Lubbock County of \$650,685 to establish Texas' first regional public defender for capital murder cases for the eighty-five counties in the 7th and 9th Administrative Judicial Regions in West Texas. The Task Force also awarded a \$621,517 grant to Bowie County to establish a public defender office serving Bowie and Red River counties in an area of northeast Texas anchored by the City of Texarkana. The grants are the first of four years of state funding to assist the counties in each region launch the new programs.

The regional capital public defender office will include highly qualified attorneys with expertise in capital defense and excellent support staff. Currently there are very few attorneys qualified and available for appointment to capital murder cases in the region. The office will also allow counties to have budget predictability and to provide a high quality defense if they have a capital murder case. "We worked very hard this session to improve the quality of indigent defense, and this grant should ensure that our constitutional right to counsel works the way it was originally envisioned," said Kel Seliger, State Senator, District 31. "I'm glad to see this program serving the people of the Panhandle and the South Plains." Robert Duncan, State Senator, District 28, said that a "Regional public defender for capital murder cases in West Texas would be a tremendous benefit to the judicial system in this region, as well as to the counties and the State of Texas."

The administrative presiding judges for the two regions, Dean Rucker of the 7th Region and Kelly Moore of the 9th Region, were instrumental in the program's development and helped organize several regional stakeholders' meetings. "I am optimistic that the office will set the standard for defense of death penalty cases in Texas, and will serve as an excellent example for future offices around the State," said Judge Moore. The program also enjoys broad support in the region as indicated by the letters of support from state senators, state representatives, statewide defense organizations, local commissioners, judges, prosecutors and others.

"I want to commend Lubbock County for taking the lead in development of the first super-regional public defender initiative in Texas," said Sharon Keller, chair of the Task Force. "This program should help all the participating counties assure a high quality defense in capital cases."

“The eighty-five counties in West Texas stand to benefit greatly from the establishment of this office, in both quality of defense and in the use of taxpayer dollars,” said David Slayton, Lubbock County Director of Court Administration. “I am extremely excited to see that the Task Force recognized the benefits of this office and chose to fund the proposal. Eleven months of hard work by numerous individuals have certainly paid off and will continue to pay off for years to come.”

The public defender office funded for Bowie and Red River counties will include ten staff that will represent indigent defendants in all misdemeanor, felony and juvenile cases, including limited appeals. Capital murder cases where the death penalty is sought are the only types of cases to be excluded. The program will be Texas’ first county-operated public defender program that will provide representation in virtually all indigent cases.

“We in Red River County are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Public Defender program,” said Morris Harville, Red River County Judge. “Red River County, the Gateway to Texas for Davy Crockett and all those that followed him, is glad to be among the first of the less-populated counties, to afford all citizens fair and equal representation in our courts.”

“We are greatly appreciative of the support that the Task Force has shown in the creation of our Public Defender Program,” said Judge John Miller, 102nd District Court (Bowie and Red River counties). “We look forward to improving the proficiency of legal representation for those persons who are least able to afford it. The indigent defendant is entitled to effective representation no differently than the defendant who can afford the attorney of his choice. This grant is going to help provide that representation.”

Additional information available at Task Force's web site:

<http://www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid/>