

LegalFront

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Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Opens First Regional Public Defender Office in Texas

By Ash Kosiewicz

To help ensure that indigent persons charged with crime in rural Texas counties have adequate access to counsel, Val Verde County and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) signed a contract in late March to operate and staff the state's first regional public defender office.

The Val Verde County Regional Public Defender office, supported with \$1.2 million over four years from the Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense (TFID), opened May 1. In its first year, \$470,000 in state funding and \$117,000 in county funding will be used to start the office. Edwards, Kinney, and Terrell counties adjoin Val Verde, all of which are eligible to access Regional Public Defender services.

TRLA Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Promoting the dignity, self-sufficiency, safety,
and stability of low-income Texans

"This is probably the most important project we've ever done to date," said Bryan Wilson, grants administrator for TFID. "A non-profit corporation working with the county to provide indigent defense services, as far as we can find, it's never been done."

Only five of Texas's 254 counties currently have public defender offices, and no Texas county is currently served by a regional public defender. The Texas Comptroller, TFID, and most other states have concluded that public defender offices, which focus exclusively on representing indigent criminal defendants, can offer higher quality representation at less cost than systems under which private lawyers are appointed to represent defendants on a case-by-case basis.

The Regional Public Defender office will provide a prompt interview and all necessary legal representation to indigent defendants in all felony,

Continued on Page 2.

Indigent Defense Grants Awarded

The Texas Task Force on Indigent Defense awarded grants totaling \$14.5 million to improve indigent defense in Texas counties at its December meeting.

Formula grants based on population were awarded to 227 counties, totaling \$12.7 million. The grants provide state money to counties for increased indigent defense costs using a standard allocation formula. Grants ranged from \$5,032 to Loving County to \$1,908,009 to Harris County. "These grants are a good starting point for the state in accepting more fiscal responsibility of implementing the Fair Defense Act," said Tarrant County Commissioner Glen Whitley, the chair of the Task Force's Grants and Reporting Committee.

In addition to the formula grants, five multi-year discretionary grants for new direct client services were continued from last year in Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Hidalgo, and Limestone counties amounting to \$872,000. Val Verde County received a new multi-year discretionary grant, beginning with \$470,000 this year, to establish a regional public

Continued on Page 2

Inside this issue of

LegalFront

TEXAS ACCESS TO
JUSTICE COMMISSION

3

SPOTLIGHT:
GOVERNMENT
EMPLOYEES —
OVERCOMING OBSTACLES
TO PRO BONO SERVICES

7

JUSTICE
AT WORK

10

POVERTY LAW
PRACTICE

18

TEAJF REPORT

28

TEXAS BAR
FOUNDATION

29

ANNOUNCEMENTS

31

CALENDAR

32

Public Defender continued from Page 1.

misdemeanor, and juvenile cases through trial and direct appeal.

“Public defender offices make sense for the same reasons that lawyers join together in big civil law firms,” said TRLA Executive Director David Hall. “They share not only secretaries and libraries, but they share ideas and experience, which are critical to the efficient and effective delivery of all legal services to all persons, civil and criminal, rich and poor alike.”

Since passage of the Texas Fair Defense Act in 2001, indigent defense spending has risen statewide about 53 percent - from \$91.5 million to \$140.2 million. The state has provided roughly \$15 million

of the annual increase, while counties have paid the rest. In Val Verde County alone, indigent defense spending has increased more than 83 percent since passage of the Fair Defense Act—from \$176,000 to \$323,000 per year.

Caseload trends over the past five years indicate that in the first 12 months, defendants may be expected to qualify for services in 315 felony, 940 misdemeanor, 60 juvenile, and 10 appellate cases.

Ash Kosiewicz is the communications coordinator with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid.

Grant awarded continued from Page 1.

defender office to serve Edwards and Val Verde Counties (*see front page article*).

Hill County was awarded a discretionary grant of \$139,000 to set up video conferences between courtrooms, the county jail and court-appointed attorneys to provide attorneys better access to their jailed clients. “This grant will put Hill County miles ahead of where it was in complying with the Fair Defense Act and truly provide indigent defendants with meaningful access to their court appointed attorneys,” said County Court-at-Law Judge Lee Harris from Hill County. More than half of the attorneys on Hill County’s court

appointment list have offices outside of the county.

“I believe that the grant will greatly reduce the turnover in the attorneys willing to accept court appointments for Hill County cases,” Harris said.

Hood County received a discretionary grant of \$115,000 to implement a regional video teleconference system for juveniles from the county who are detained in Garza, Bowie and Kerr counties. And Polk County received a grant of \$196,000 to establish a regional video teleconferencing system to improve representation for indigent juvenile offenders in Polk, San Jacinto and Trinity counties.

The screenshot shows the homepage of TexasLawyersHelp.org. The page features a search bar at the top, a navigation menu on the left, and several content blocks. The main content area includes a welcome message, a 'New Cases' section for pro bono attorneys, a 'What's Inside?' section with links to a calendar, library, and group lists, and a 'Pro Bono Benefits' section. There are also links to various legal organizations and services.

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