

TASK FORCE ON INDIGENT DEFENSE

Post Office Box 12066
Austin, Texas, 78711-2066

512-936-6994 (Voice)

For Immediate Release
May 25, 2006

Contact: Terri Tuttle
512-936-6994

AUSTIN – Greater technology for managing criminal cases in Texas combined with improved coordination among prosecutors, defense counsel, courts and law enforcement can mean counties save money and improve justice in the end.

That’s a conclusion of a study by Texas A&M University’s Public Policy Research Institute examining criminal-case processing in Harris, Bexar and El Paso counties.

“The Task Force, counties, and indigent defendants will greatly benefit from this study,” said Sharon Keller, presiding judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals and Task Force on Indigent Defense chair. “The Task Force will work with counties to improve their ability to measure the progress that we are making towards improving court processing in general, and indigent defense processing in particular.”

Texas A&M researchers found better technology led to earlier release of people arrested but who would not in the end be charged with crimes. In Harris County – the only study site that had an integrated computer system available to people working on both sides of criminal cases – fewer defendants were jailed and those detained were released sooner.

El Paso County targeted automation more narrowly, linking only law enforcement and prosecutors for early case screening and filing decisions. Bexar County processed criminal cases primarily through efficient work practices and a centralized data system with limited integration across departments.

Researchers looked at systems in each of the three counties to assess how electronic identification was made of people arrested, how quickly arrest information could be screened by prosecutors and how charges could be filed sooner.

The study found the more integrated a case-management system was, the faster cases could be handled – as many as a quarter of misdemeanors were disposed within

three days of an arrest in Harris County's system. El Paso County, the next most integrated site, disposed of 15 percent of all misdemeanors within three days of an arrest.

With sound technology strategies, counties save money as a result and people in jail spend less time there, the study concluded.

The full report is available at <http://www.courts.state.tx.us/oca/tfid/Resources.asp>.

The report recommends that Texas counties develop strategies built on computer systems to speed the flow of information from law enforcement officers to the prosecutor and that prosecutors implement procedures to return a prompt filing decision.

Researchers recommended that the Task Force on Indigent Defense consider minimum requirements for jurisdictions to demonstrate the prompt appointment of counsel.

The State Justice Institute sponsored the study in cooperation with the Task Force on Indigent Defense, which operates under the Texas Office of Court Administration. Dr. Tony Fabelo, former director of the state's Criminal Justice Policy Council, served as the project's adviser.

Additional information available at Task Force's web site: <http://www.courts.state.tx.us/tfid/>.

##