

Objectives of the Harris County Public Defender's Office

- ◆ Provide trial and appellate representation to indigent clients charged with, or convicted of, felonies in district court.
- ◆ Provide trial counsel and support services to indigent clients who are acutely mentally ill or intellectually disabled and charged with a misdemeanor in the fifteen county criminal courts at law.
- ◆ Provide representation for juveniles accused of acts of delinquency in juvenile court.
- ◆ Provide continuing legal education services to assistant public defenders and private defense counsel who represent indigent clients.
- ◆ Act as a resource and support to private defense counsel assigned to indigent clients.
- ◆ Improve the provision of services to mentally ill misdemeanor defendants.
- ◆ Utilize performance measures of indigent defense services to provide evidence of effectiveness.
- ◆ Engage in a collaborative effort with the defense bar for systemic policy development and decision-making.

TJJC advocates for a strong public defense system in Harris County, as well as other cost-effective, smart-on-crime criminal and juvenile justice practices across Texas.

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Harris County Public Defender's Office: *An Introduction*



Harris County Public Defender's Office

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About The Public Defender's Office In Harris County, Texas

The Harris County Public Defender's Office (PDO) was authorized by the Commissioners Court to represent indigent persons charged in the misdemeanor, felony, and juvenile courts. The office receives its cases by appointments from judges. Persons represented by this office can expect zealous representation from the combined experience of lawyers, investigators, social workers, and other administrative staff.

The PDO is funded through a grant from the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (formerly the Task Force on Indigent Defense). While judges will appoint the PDO to represent some indigent defendants, they will continue to appoint qualified private assigned counsel in many cases, resulting in a "hybrid system" that is designed to enhance effective representation of indigent defendants.

The Chief Public Defender, Mr. Alex Bunin, serves as a county department director who also works with other county departments to coordinate available services for indigent defendants. In particular, the Chief Public Defender will work with the Harris County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority, local law schools, and others to improve criminal defense, mental health treatment, and other services to indigent defendants.

The PDO is monitored by a 15-member oversight board, with its budget controlled by the Commissioners Court.

Objectives of the Harris County Public Defender's Office

- ◆ Act as a "voice" at the table in county discussions regarding systemic policy development and decision-making.
- ◆ Advocate for the needs of all indigent clients in Harris County.
- ◆ Identify community resources available for indigent clients in Harris County.
- ◆ Partner with community resources to increase collaborative efforts in indigent representation.
- ◆ Advocate for systematic changes that will benefit all indigent clients.
- ◆ Educate the community regarding the complexities of the criminal justice system and the value of a fair system of representation for the indigent.
- ◆ Engage the community in advocating for systemic change and resource development to prevent recidivism.
- ◆ Provide opportunities for continuing legal education.
- ◆ Act as a resource to any private counsel appointed to represent indigent clients.



Implementation Phases

PHASE I of the Public Defender's Office began in February 2011 with the creation of the **Mental Health Division**, which consists of the trial chief, three assistant public defenders, and support staff, including social workers. The PDO is appointed to represent misdemeanor defendants who are the most severely mentally ill or intellectually disabled. In addition, an **Appellate Division** was also created, which includes a division chief, ten assistant public defenders, and support staff. The Appellate Division expects to represent approximately 350 appeals per year.



PHASE II will expand the Office's caseload to include cases from the Felony Adult and Juvenile Trial Courts. The **Felony Adult Division** began taking cases in October 2011. It has a division chief, ten assistant public defenders, three investigators, and support staff. It is anticipated that the PDO will represent approximately 1,600 to 2,500 felony trial cases annually. The **Juvenile Division** began representing clients in December 2011. It consists of a division chief, eight assistant public defenders, two investigators, and support staff. It is expected that the PDO will receive approximately 2,000 juvenile appointments annually.