

2016-H3877-TX-DJ
Program Narrative (Attachment I)

Hidalgo County is 1,588 square miles and is located at the south most tip of the state of Texas. Its southern border covers seventy-eight miles of Texas/Mexico border along the Rio Grande River. As per most recent census estimates, Hidalgo County reflects a population of slightly over 774,769.

As a result of its proximity to the border, Hidalgo County experiences a high volume of criminal activity that is stemmed by various factors including a high unemployment rate, economically disadvantaged households, below national average education levels, illegal immigrant entries, drug trafficking and human smuggling, among others.

The aforementioned factors along with the increasing population have an exponential and adverse effect on the overall criminal justice system in Hidalgo County (see Exhibit A).

EXHIBIT A:

Number of cases Heard and Disposed – 2015 Auxiliary Court Report:

COURT	Hearings	Disposed	Writs/Fugitives	TOTAL
Auxiliary A & B	513	360	380	1,253
92nd	1,541	272	37	1,850
93rd	1,314	249	54	1,617
139th	626	198	22	846
206th	839	296	0	1,135
275th	1,169	412	41	1,622
332nd	191	92	13	296
370th	388	351	2	741
389th	483	180	18	681
398th	1,188	317	25	1,530
430th	766	257	18	1,041
TOTAL	9,018	2,984	610	12,612

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The Hidalgo County criminal justice system is comprised, at the moment, of eleven (11) district courts, eight (8) county courts at law and two auxiliary courts (auxiliary court A and auxiliary court B). The auxiliary courts main purpose is to provide support to the district courts. This support is managed by having the auxiliary courts hear and dispose of the overflow of criminal cases from all of the eleven district courts. Ten district courts are housed in the Hidalgo County's main courthouse building, one district court is located at the Judge Mario E. Ramirez Juvenile Detention center, auxiliary court A is housed in the Hidalgo County courthouse annex, and auxiliary court B is housed in the Hidalgo County administration building located across from the courthouse.

Hidalgo County data reflects the immense support the auxiliary courts have provided to all eleven district courts. This support has translated into having a more manageable criminal caseload for all eleven Hidalgo County District Courts thus improving Hidalgo County's stance in complying with an individuals' right guaranteed in the Sixth Amendment.

Since the JAG Program allows a recipient to support a broad range of activities to enhance or improve its criminal justice system, it is through the auxiliary courts that Hidalgo County has decided to utilize the Edward J. Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program.

The auxiliary courts are a component of the entire Hidalgo County criminal justice system and their function and activities play an integral part in improving the criminal justice system in Hidalgo County.

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Below is the full-time staff structure of the auxiliary courts in Hidalgo County:

Two Judges
Two Bailiffs
Two Court Reporters
One Court Coordinator
One Court Liaison

All staff members employed in these positions set forth a collaborative effort to ensure the criminal caseload system is processed timely and efficiently; however, due to the availability of funds from the JAG Program, Hidalgo County has decided to use the JAG Program monies to fund the Auxiliary Court's Court Coordinator.

Below is a summary of the activities this staff member performs within the auxiliary courts; thus, improving the overall criminal justice system in Hidalgo County:

Court Coordinator:

The Court Coordinator's functions encompass both auxiliary court A and auxiliary court B. The Court Coordinator maintains awareness of new developments in court administration, nationally and locally and maintains special materials and files relating to records, rules of procedures and other items relating to court activity; reviews files and makes sure the cases are set for a hearing, trial, etc. (makes sure the case is moving along smoothly); makes daily docket entries (from court hearings) on court files; acts as a liaison between the Judge and Counsel.

Again, the activities from this staff position have demonstrated a significant positive impact on the improvement of the criminal justice system in Hidalgo County through the auxiliary courts. It has proven to be essential and the prospect of not having this position in place would have a profound adverse effect on the criminal justice system in Hidalgo County. Consequently, Hidalgo County has recognized the possibility of a shortfall of grant funding, particularly the Edward J. Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program. Nonetheless, in the event that the statutory authority for the JAG Program would cease, the Judges and Budget Officer would petition the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court for a continuation of funding with the use of local funds.

Meanwhile, Hidalgo County will continue to use the JAG Program monies to fund the Court Coordinator position which was also funded by the JAG FY 05, JAG FY 06, JAG FY 07, JAG FY 08, JAG FY 09, JAG FY 10, JAG FY 11, JAG FY 12, JAG FY 2013, JAG FY 2014 and JAG FY 2015 grants. As with the other JAG grants, the new JAG FY 16 grant will be utilized after the preceding JAG grant funds have been exhausted. Our projection reflects the JAG FY 16 grant will start funding this position from August 2016 to March of 2017 approximately.